

A Hermeneutical Model for Research on the Evaluation of Academic Achievement

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Abstract

The hermeneutic view, as a constructive approach in social sciences, is revived in last decades. Principles of this view are applied to educational studies as well. In this essay, the application of these principles to the area of research on evaluation of academic achievement is discussed. In this discussion the main point of the hermeneutic view, namely the hermeneutic circle, is highlighted within the framework of *Heidegger's* and *Gadamer's* views. Accordingly, four steps are suggested for doing research on the evaluation of academic achievement. In the first step, the researcher tries to determine whether the teacher is aware of her pre-understandings in the process of evaluation. This is because evaluation, like any other cognitive activity, is not advanced with an empty mind. In the second step, the researcher deals with the question whether the teacher tries to enter into the intellectual horizon of the pupil. In effect, in the third step, the researcher deals with the question whether the teacher confirms or changes the pre-understandings identified in the first step. Finally, in the fourth step, the researcher looks to see whether the teacher provides a 'fusion of horizons': a fusion between the intellectual horizon of hers and that of the pupil's. This is to say that from the hermeneutic view, proper evaluation is far from being a one-directional activity of the teacher.

Keywords: Hermeneutic view; Evaluation of Academic Achievement; Research; Hermeneutical Circle; Fusion of horizons; *Heidegger*; *Gadamer*;

INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutical view has been extended in recent times. While it was considered in the first instance as a way to interpret the holy texts, *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (1977) characterized it as a science or skill that deals with understanding texts in general. *Wilhelm Dilthey* (1989) regarded hermeneutics as a particular method for humanities, in contrast to natural sciences, that deals with discovering meaning in human affairs. *Martin Heidegger* (1962) changed the focus of hermeneutics from epistemology to ontology and considered hermeneutics as something that enables us to understand human existence rather than being restricted to a 'method' comparable to that of natural sciences. *Hans George Gadamer* (1993) showed that understanding is a complicated process that requires a fusion between two horizons; horizon of the author and horizon of the interpreter.

Hermeneutics in the extended meaning is being expected to play a role in providing a new paradigm for social sciences or rather scientific endeavor in general. In the present paper, hermeneutics is used to show the constructive nature of evaluation process in academic achievement. The importance of hermeneutic view in dealing with evaluation stems from the interpretive nature of hermeneutic treatment. This view shows the inevitability of interpretation in all kinds of understanding. Hence, when a teacher is reading his or her student's answers to the questions, he or she actually deals with a text and hence an interpretive endeavor is involved. This indicates that the teacher's activity is a hermeneutical activity and should be studied using the principles on which any hermeneutical activity or interpretation is based. This point shows that the objective inclination in evaluations rooted in the positivists' legacy is a myth. A teacher cannot read the writings of his/her pupils 'objectively' because a certain dose of interpretation is inevitably involved in the activity of reading a text. Hermeneutics does not necessarily embrace pure subjectivity in reading a text. Rather, particularly some versions of it like that of *Gadamer*, put emphasis on a balance between the subjective and objective sides. But, what is certainly lost in this vision is the radical objective account which was supported by positivistic and quantitative views. Thus, it is important to see what merits hermeneutics has in showing the hidden aspects of educational evaluation.

Educational evaluation in its broad meaning involves a systematic view on the value of a subject (Pinar et al, 1996, p. 732). Assessment and measurement are regarded to be restricted in scope. Evaluating academic achievement is a particular case of educational evaluation in which attainment of instructional aims is involved. Some (e.g. Gallagher, 1992; Loudon, 1991) have shown that hermeneutics has important implications for education in general. There are also some hints (e.g. Patten, 1975) in the literature regarding the importance of phenomenological views, including hermeneutics, in leading educational research. In particular, hermeneutic circles having a special position in hermeneutics could be inspiring in rethinking evaluation in education. *Patten* (1975), who for instance, has discussed naturalistic evaluation as including qualitative views in general and hermeneutical view in particular, only refers to hermeneutic circles very briefly. Thus, the literature is not so rich in so far as the relationship between hermeneutics and achievement evaluation is concerned.

In what follows, a model will be suggested for doing research on evaluation of academic achievement based on hermeneutics.

THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE AS A FRAMEWORK

It seems that showing the importance of hermeneutic view in guiding research on academic achievement needs a more detailed and full-fledged analysis on hermeneutic circles in relation to evaluation. In this paper, a model will be suggested based on a combination of some Heideggerian and Gadamerian concepts.

Hermeneutic circle is a basic concept in hermeneutics. This concept refers to a circular process involved in understanding. As **Figure 1** shows, the basic form of hermeneutic circle indicates a circular relationship between the whole of a text and its components. In this relationship, initial understanding of the whole of a text provides, on one hand, a background for understanding the meaning of its parts, namely words and sentences. On the other hand, increment in understanding the parts leads to more coherence and integration with regard to the whole of the text. A further point about hermeneutic circle is that it is open-ended. In contrast to closed or vicious circles, a hermeneutic circle could happen recurrently. This is to say that the relationship between wholes and parts could occur recurrently so that finally a firm understanding of a text becomes available.

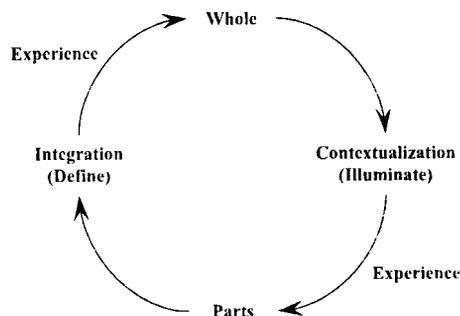


Figure 1- The Basic Form of the Hermeneutic Circle
(Bontekoe, 1996)

THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE OF RESEARCH ON EVALUATION: FOUR STEPS

Having considered the basic concept of hermeneutic circle and its characteristics, a hermeneutic circle will be suggested regarding evaluation research on academic achievement. This model involves four steps that are explained below.

First Step: Determining Pre-understandings

To recognize educational evaluation as understanding and interpreting texts, we need to take the basic point of the hermeneutic view into account that every

understanding begins with pre-understandings. This indicates that when a teacher evaluates pupils' writings, he or she does not perform this with a blank mind. Accordingly, the first question that the researcher of academic achievement should deal with is this: what are the pre-understandings in the teacher's evaluation? This question refers to the first step of the hermeneutic circle.

Pre-understandings or pre-structures of understanding, as *Heidegger* (1962, p. 191) has stated, have three features. First, our understandings originate in what we already have had. *Heidegger's* term here is 'fore-having'¹. This concept refers to the characteristics of our relationships in the world. In the case of evaluation, we might say that fore-having refers to the relationships of teacher with pupils. This relationships lead to the second feature of pre-understanding which *Heidegger* calls 'fore-sight'², meaning that we take an initial view on what we have relationships with. In the case of evaluation, we might say that foresight refers to the initial view of the teacher on pupils as the consequence of his or her relationships with them. The third feature of pre-understanding is termed by *Heidegger* as 'fore-conception'³. This feature refers to fore-sight as it is reflected in language by means of certain concepts. Fore-conception in the case of evaluation would refer to the words and concepts that teachers use to express their initial views about pupils. The researcher of evaluation should first study the pre-understandings of teachers or evaluators by taking the above-mentioned three features into account. In other words, the characteristics of teachers' relationships with their pupils, as well as their fore-sights and fore-concepts on the pupils should be studied.

From the hermeneutic point of view, to perform a desirable evaluation requires teachers or evaluators to become explicitly aware of their pre-understandings. Of course these pre-understandings exist whether or not teachers are explicitly aware of them, but it is desirable that they make them explicit in order to be able to recognize and control them. For instance, a teacher might notice during the first sessions of a class that a student talks excessively (fore-having), hence he or she might become pessimistic on the student's thinking ability (fore-sight) and refer to him as mindless (fore-conception). Having got such pre-understandings, the teacher will underestimate the value of the student's writing without being explicitly aware that her pre-understandings have a negative effect on her evaluation. In contrast, when he or she becomes aware that he or she has pre-understandings in reading pupil's writings, he or she would be more capable to recognize the negative effect of his or her pre-understandings and consequently would be more able to control them.

Second Step: Entering into the Student's Intellectual Horizon

During the second step of the hermeneutic circle of evaluation, the researcher deals with the question of whether the teacher tries to enter the intellectual horizon of the student or not. Without trying to do this, the teacher would be exposed to the threat of continuing to evaluate the student's writings while relying solely on her pre-understandings. The possible ways for entering into the student's intellectual

1. Fore-having is a term to show the background in which the person has lived and has experienced relationships with other persons or things.

2. Fore-sight is a term to show an initial activity of the mind in relation to someone or something as a consequence of the experience involved in the background referred to as Fore-having.

3. Fore-conception has a strong weight of language. In fact, when fore-sight is given a linguistic character, of being considered by a concept or word, it turns to a fore-conception.

horizon are separation, structural analysis, and involvement in the text. By separation, it is meant that the teacher attempts to put her pre-understandings aside temporarily or distance them from the student's writing. Structural or grammatical analysis refers to the teacher's particular attention to the very structure of the student's works. For instance, when a student gives a paper to the teacher, he or she should evaluate it with regard to the identified criteria for writing a paper. Finally, by involvement with the text it is meant that in reading the student's works, the teacher should attempt to have empathy with him. In other words, he or she should get involved with the text as a person who tries to understand it. In all these three ways of entering the student's intellectual horizon, the task of the researcher on academic evaluation is clear. She or he should consider whether the teacher or evaluator uses these possible ways to enter the student's world or not. Where it is known that such ways do not appeal to the teacher, the evaluation should be considered problematic. To perform a reliable evaluation, a teacher or evaluator should enter the student's intellectual world rather than overcoming her pre-understandings.

Third Step: Confirming or Qualifying Pre-understandings

At the end of the second step, a hermeneutic circle is completed. In other words, the circular motion that started from evaluator and her pre-understandings, by passing through the text of student's works and his intellectual world returns to the evaluator. Now, the third step starts by starting another circle around the first one. This, as was mentioned above, is because hermeneutic circle is an open-ended one rather than a closed or vicious circle. During the third step, results of the first circle appear. As a consequence of the encounter of the evaluator's pre-understandings with the student's writing, it becomes possible that these pre-understandings be confirmed or qualified. In case the evaluator confirms her pre-understandings following the second step, they will still be with her albeit with a difference as the pre-understandings are unexamined in the first circle while they are examined in the second, and hence are regarded as the basis for starting it. On the other hand, where the evaluator finds some counterevidence to her pre-understandings, he or she should qualify them and take their qualified form as the basis for the fourth step.

The latter state, namely qualifying the pre-understandings, is usually a difficult job. It requires the evaluator to show open-mindedness and, if needed, change his or her pre-understandings. Anyway, where he or she, despite his or her recognition of some biases in his or her pre-understandings, avoids changing them, the evaluation fails to be reliable again, this time due to deficiencies in the third step. Thus, the task of the researcher on academic evaluation in the third step or in the new hermeneutic circle becomes clear. It is to observe whether the evaluator confirms or qualifies her pre-understandings and, particularly where qualification seems necessary, whether he or she changes his or her pre-understandings or improperly justifies them. Hence, to evaluate more reliably, the evaluator should take her findings in the second step seriously and change her pre-understandings properly where needed, and this, of course, requires the evaluator to be open-minded in the process of evaluation.

Fourth Step: Interpretation and Fusion of Horizons

The final step in the hermeneutic circle of evaluation deals with the interpretation of the student’s work and, in Gadamerian terms, the fusion of intellectual horizons of the evaluator and the student. It is expected that an authentic understanding appear in this step where the evaluator takes her confirmed or qualified pre-understandings into account and attends to the student’s works accordingly, then a proper interpretation of the text appears and he or she achieves a proper understanding of the student’s works. The difference between this step and the second step is that in the latter the evaluator tries to keep his or her pre-understandings apart from the text, while in the former he or she uses her confirmed or qualified pre-understandings as a basis for understanding and interpreting the text. The crucial point in this step is that interpretation and understanding of the student’s work appears as a result of fusion of intellectual horizons of the evaluator and the student. In other words, what happens here is that the intellectual horizons of both the evaluator and the student that were considered in the first and the second steps respectively, become integrated and appear as the basis for the interpretation of the student’s work. Hence, the evaluator is not the sole determinant in the evaluation process. Rather, academic evaluation is a two-way process in which the evaluator and her pre-understandings are dialectically related to the student and his views.

Accordingly, the task of the researcher on academic evaluation clear in this final step is to see whether the evaluator takes her confirmed or qualified pre-understandings into account in the interpretation of the student’s writings or rather uses some rigid criteria to continue her evaluation. Reliable academic evaluations are possible if the evaluators avoid using rigid, ‘objective’ criteria and, instead, try to provide a proper interpretation and understanding of the student’s works. This would require a fusion of the intellectual horizons of the teacher and the student by the evaluator. The points discussed in the four steps of hermeneutic circles of evaluation in academic achievement are shown in **Figure 2** below.

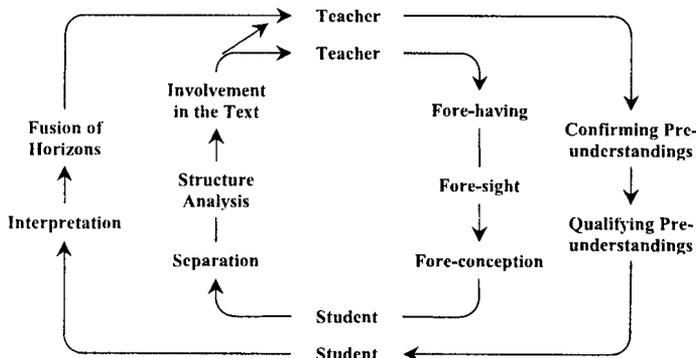


Figure 2- Hermeneutic Circle in Academic Evaluation

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