

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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From Knowing to Describing



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I work in spaces where everyone's a literal expert on something. (They usually think they're experts on *everything*, all at once!)

Expertise can be valuable. Yet it can also short-circuit collaborative work: Someone asserts what they "know," backing it up with education or status or experience, and suddenly the energy shifts away from the possible and emerging to the known, static, and "true."

At times, expertise masks a person's discomfort with ambiguity or not-knowing. Other times, it's invoked to devalue multiple perspectives or reject ideas not aligned with what an "expert" knows.

When this happens, what do we do? How can collaborative, relational practitioners respond generatively (and generously) to the seduction of expertise in ourselves and others?

In my own practice, I find it useful to engage expertise by shifting the focus from *interpretation* to *description*.

What do I mean?

Expertise tends to rely on interpretive knowing. As I'm using the term, interpretation looks through a particular, discursive lens to decide what something means, why it happened, and how to respond. It defines things and points toward action. It masquerades as objectivity.

Interpretation can be useful in the right place and at the right time. But premature interpretation shuts down possibilities. We seek too often to interpret our experiences before we have described (and understood) them from multiple perspectives.

Descriptive knowing, as I'm using the term, relies on metaphor and the vocabulary of the senses—sight, smell, taste, sensation, perception—to re-enter an experience and help understand what it was like. It emphasizes the subjective.

Doing so interrupts personal and cultural tendencies to privilege cognition by inviting people to identify and explore other ways of making sense of something. Taking the time to describe an experience as fully as possible, before deciding what it means or how to respond, helps people create rich, multifaceted understandings. It opens space for possibility, serendipity, and creative accidents.

As a facilitator and care provider, I find I am more useful to others, and maintain a not-knowing stance longer, when I focus on curious questions that evoke descriptive knowing:

- When you look back on that experience today, what do you notice?
- What was the first inkling that you were encountering something familiar? How did you notice?
- What were you thinking or feeling at the time?
- What sort of emotions are you feeling as you describe it to me?
- Can you paint a picture with words of what it was like to experience it in that way?
- How would you describe this experience to your daughter? Your mother? Your partner? Your dog?

As I listen to people's descriptions, I find that asking myself, "What is going on in me as I hear this description?" helps me remain open and attentive. If appropriate, I might describe my own responses: "As you speak, I get goosebumps" or "What you said elicited a memory of sugar cookies in my grandmother's kitchen." I want to say what *happened* as I listened rather than stating what my response *means*.

Turning to description when expertise threatens a collaborative process reminds me that my own expertise is process, not content. As facilitator, I want to find ways to invite, engage, and flesh out multiple dimensions of an experience or idea – the visual, kinesthetic, metaphorical, cultural, cognitive, behavioral, temporal, affective, and so forth.