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Top of the Heap: Helen Verran

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By Hannah Gibson



For this installment of the Top of the Heap series, I spoke with Helen Verran, a historian and philosopher of science who is Adjunct Professor at Charles Darwin University in Australia as well as holding a position at the Norwegian University of the Arctic.

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A Health Literacy and Interpreting tool for remote Australian Aboriginal contexts

Building shared understandings of body systems, and agreed ways forward for health and treatment.

What are we building?

We are building an iPad or generic custom-designed touch screen application that shows interactive biomedical images, animations and models.

Who is it for?

The application will be used as part of a project www.cdcu.edu.au/hi that will be implemented in a complex health services delivery environment where there is a diversity of languages with little English spoken locally and a mounting epidemic of preventable chronic disease, it is for:

- people living in nine remote Aboriginal communities and many homeland centers, in northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia
- a large range of professionals in various roles, mostly speaking English only
- local aboriginal health staff undertrained and often marginalised



A health literacy and interpreting tool

How is it unique?

We propose that this application will differ from other similar applications in that it will

- not contain any embedded health messages (ie not didactic)
- not privilege the biomedical model of the human body
- not contain any microscopic imagery
- be non-sequential (ie have few embedded sequences, and depend upon users in conversation for its navigational logic)
- focus first on aspects of the healthy body and pathology leading up to chronic disease and treatment

In our theoretical starting point

- we take seriously Aboriginal service users' knowledge and understandings of their own bodies
- we work from an Aboriginal definition of communication as building shared understandings rather than a western definition based on the transfer of information from one to another
- we believe that present attempts to improve health communication and health literacy in remote communities utilise a 'top-down' approach which blames the

A display of a story about computer application that was never built – the Touch Pad Body. In 2016 it exists only as electronic seed code in a few computers. Apart from that it has life in two stories that have been told about it: a pamphlet of four pages ([see PDF here](#); first page at right) and an academic paper (Christie and Verran, 2014). The experience of collectively imagining the Touch Pad Body as an entity, and imbuing it with what might be called 'life *in potentia*', was an element in an inquiry with the project name "East Arnhem Client Education and Health Interpreting". That inquiry conducted as contract research for a local health services provider, instances the logic of inquiry that I elaborate here. It is the experience of such inquiry and the experience *in* such inquiry, which the books at the top of my pile of current reading attend to, as in undertaking methodological study I further elaborate what method in relational empiricist inquiry *is*. For me, unlike most of my contemporaries, method is quite a different matter than methodology.

In Australia I work as part of [the Ground Up group](#) in the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University in Australia's Northern Territory. We

undertake contract research, what might be called commonsense inquiry in search of useful and good responses for everyday problems of those who live in the NT's Indigenous communities. But our research includes two further elements. We insist that those who engage our services include in their budget funds earmarked to pay for the work and training of Indigenous citizen researchers. Building the capacities of cohorts of researchers who are members of the communities being researched is an integral part of contracting our services to undertake inquiry of public or social problems. From a politico-epistemic point of view this capacity building work contributes to the development of a problem's public—a public that, in addition to those whose lives are tangled in and by the social problem, necessarily includes us as academics and those who work in the government department, the NGO, or the business, that has retained our services, and perhaps others too if, say, the media get involved.

The second element, which adds onto the contract research but which we do not insist clients pay for, and for which the university system must foot the bill, and which increasingly in Australia it resists, is the academic research that is embedded in the commonsense inquiry. I style the scholarly research focus I am most interested in as inquiring into the workings of the collective politico-epistemic practices of our commonsense research. Others in our group are more interested in linguistic or organisational aspects of emerging contemporary Indigenous epistemic practice. This scholarly inquiry inquires into inquiry itself. And that insistence on iterativity in inquiry is perhaps what characterises relational empiricism as I understand it.

My first inspirations for this iterative styling of inquiry are the object lessons I learned from Yolngu Aboriginal colleagues and knowledge authorities, starting in the 1980s. Analytic concepts relevant at a particular time and place for particular sets of purposes were offered to the collective. *Milngurr, Ganma, Garma and Galtha* feature in Yolngu life as stories and more, in accounting emergence of collective life. Yolngu in other heres and nows will of course come up with alternative relevant concepts. These concepts function like diagrams in that they offer both pilotage and a form of representation when necessary (Christie and Verran, 2013; Verran and Winthereik, 2016). In addition I find inspiration in the work of John Dewey, early twentieth century Pragmatist philosopher. Dewey first articulated a vision of iterative inquiry in inventing the curriculum of the Chicago Laboratory School in 1896. Here he imagined curriculum and pedagogy as in beginning, embedded in the everyday and its social problems. Reading, writing and arithmetic, along with the subjects like physics, chemistry, language study, history and geography emerge as functions of collective life. The aim of schooling and education as Dewey saw it, was however to outgrow this common sense form of

inquiry, and grow schooling and education into inquiry into inquiry itself.

Dewey spent a lifetime in the academy attempting to convince his colleagues in philosophy that logic, for him a theory of inquiry, is form that is *not* given by some 'real structure' of a world imagined as out-there that might be known by a mind. But rather emergent in collectives, people going on inquiringly together in particular places and times in pursuit of a common purpose, and inquiring into their inquiring, as they do. It is by using forms that are emergent, as commonsense inquiry gives way to inquiry into inquiry that researchers simultaneously engage and elaborate a theory of inquiry as a single moment. This is why a Dewey text first published in 1929, features in my contribution to *Top of the Heap*.

So the book on the very top of the pile that sits by my armchair, is an old book, [Experience and Nature](#). I read it to worm my way into Dewey's story of logic and inquiry. I do not read his much later book that has logic in its title. That text it seems to me to betray his earlier insights. John Dewey, the philosopher, in 1929 argued cogently that inquiry and its logic lies within experience. Yet, in [Logic, The Theory of Inquiry](#) published in 1938, this same philosopher who had *no experience* of doing science, proposes the epistemic practices of early twentieth century science as the exemplar of logic; as *the* theory of inquiry. I'll suggest an explanation for this strange turn in Dewey's writing below. So in my reading, despite that I am concerned with logic and inquiry, I limit my focus to *Experience and Nature*. Here Dewey links the requirement to be explicit about metaphysical commitments to empirical methods of inquiry, and by extension empirical methods of inquiry into inquiry—methodology.

Having introduced my book pile and the thinking it informs, I begin my stories of reading with the 'Touch Pad Body'. The displayed pamphlet is one of a number of outcomes of a contracted research project on what the funding organisation called 'health literacy'. Alert readers of the text will discern that our collective inquiry was informed by our reading of recent work in medical anthropology. In particular, Lock and Farquhar's [Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the anthropology of material life](#) and Mol's [The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice](#), can be inferred as influences. So despite their not literally being in my pictured pile, I include these books in this text. They help explain why and how Dewey's text is useful.

Beyond the Body Proper is a door-stopper, a collection of over 50 essays—ethnographic, philosophical, and historical, arranged in nine sections. It would be usual in such a collection to style the integrative interpreting essays as a compare and contrast exercise. However, wisely in my view, the editors start with difference. They emphasise divergence, and their point of departure is 'the body proper'—what was in the heyday of Cartesian mind-body dualism the singular, individuated biological

organism with an individual psyche. Emphasising how scholars in the social sciences and humanities have moved on from that definitive singular body, the editors render the body proper as an empty formalism. It is what holds things together long enough for the various scholars whose works are collected here, each doing their own divergent thing, to agree enough that what they're looking at is common to them all. The body proper is like the vague whole thing that blind men are fingering their way around in some disagreement, as collectively they examine what we who gaze at the cartoon, recognise as an elephant.

And too Mol's 'body multiple' implies the vague whole, the empty formalism of the body proper. This formalism is what enables clinicians, vascular surgeons, pressure measuring technicians, social workers, and not least the story-telling patients, who complain of leg pains, and the ethnographer who converses with all those participants to all unproblematically assume they are speaking of one thing when their experiences could hardly be more different. Focusing on the disparate experiences, Mol suggests that the vague body proper—a concept, is in actuality a collection of many bodies all differently enacted, but, and in differing ways, all are connected by the vague empty formalism of the 'body proper'.

The 'touch pad body' too is a vague whole empty formalism. I bring it in here because it helps me answer a question that students often put to me after reading chapters from *The Body Multiple* that I have set as their prescribed reading: "But what can you *do* with the insight that the body is inevitably multiple and that the singular, definitional, imagined biophysical medical body is a vague whole empty formalism?" As the 'touch pad body' we attempted to use the juxtaposition of the concept rich 'body multiple', and the empty, formal 'body proper', to foreground practices of communication.

Communication here is not understood as a conduit, a neutral technique used to bridge the mental capacities and characteristics of individuals, something that allows minds mysteriously embedded in individual singular bodies to connect one to the other. Here communication is understood as Dewey used the notion, as means and ends of a good society, as deeply normative and political practice.

When communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking. Events turn into objects, things with a meaning. They may be referred to when they do not exist [in the here and now of a conversation], and thus be operative among things distant in space and time, through vicarious presence in a new medium. (*Experience*

and *Nature*, p.138)

This idea of communication incorporates an understanding of representation that has faded today in the wake of the mid-twentieth century ascendance of positivism. This more inclusive and vague meaning of communication and representational was however still a force as recently as the 1960s. In my pile of reading, it is represented by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's [*The Concept of Representation*](#) (1967). As Pitkin tells it, representation is the work of managing a paradox—the practices involved in making something present that is not actually present in a here and now. To be concerned with communication in this sense is to become sensitised to all the work that is involved in expanding the resources of experience.

The 'Touch Pad Body' is concerned with re-presentation of Indigenous body (the hyphen indicating my commitment to re-presenting that old version of representation). In clinical encounters in northeast Arnhem Land an Indigenous body might well be there in the here and now, but nevertheless, because of the cultivated blindness of biomedical eyes to bodies that are not biomedical bodies, that physically here and now Indigenous body exists outside the here and now of the clinical encounter. The Indigenous body as a signing materialising body is uneasy, has precipitated the clinical encounter, but it cannot easily be connected up with the biomedical body. Certainly that exclusion is a problem for the ill Indigenous body, but of course it also actively prevents any possibility of informed consent, so it is also of vital concern for a medical practitioner.

The empty vague formalism of the 'Touch Pad Body' however does have capacity in the here and now of a clinical encounter to become, albeit partially, as simultaneously both the Indigenous body and the biomedical body. The annotated touch pad body that emerges from a clinical encounter mediates; it is a body of the collective experience of the conversation of that encounter. This partially connected body emerged naturalistically within the encounter.

So the 'body proper', 'the body multiple' and 'the touch pad body' all speak to the on-going agency of the concept of body as an empty formalism. This brings me back to my book pile with *Experience and Nature* sitting on top, and to the questions that students ask about how to go beyond merely showing again and again the sort of multiplicity that Mol demonstrates. My answer to students reminds them that they need to learn how to trust other knowers, as subjects figured in unfamiliar ways, and even more tricky, how to trust objects known, for example numbers, that equally might be figured in odd and peculiar ways. To do that we need to learn how to recognise and respect, and how to work well with particular concepts as empty formalisms. In part this is what my [*Science and an*](#)

[*African Logic*](#) deals with in taking on the idea of number as such as an empty formalism. And that is why, perhaps immodestly, it features in my reading pile. Selectively re-reading it reminds me of why I should struggle with Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. Dewey's 'nature' is perhaps the ur-empty formalism.

Unlike other empiricists both of his times and ours, Dewey opposes what he calls "the postulate of immediate empiricism" (Dewey, 1905). Experience as Dewey has it consists in the first instance not of theorize-able contents—things known, but of having and enjoying. Experience is the inseparable engagement of the objects of our concern with our concern: the beings loved and hated *and* the loving and hating. The objects of experience—the things known, inevitably blend into their own backgrounds. So as we experience *things* we experience the settings of things; we can only ever know things in a particular here and now. But, as a heuristic in knowing about knowing we can strategically imagine setting as an empty formalism—nature. Nature is a persisting being... a constant of all experience and incorporated into our doings and carings. Experience is our doing and caring "penetrating into nature and expanding through it" through inquiry and inquiring into that inquiring.

Dewey's works are voluminous, he lived a long life and wrote copiously, and his texts are notoriously difficult to read. His words are obscure and often arranged in frankly unhelpful ways. For me reading Dewey is a slog in a way few other texts I read are. Part of the problem in reading is that I am completely unfamiliar with the critics he is attempting to pre-empt and out-manoeuvre. It took a bit of detective work for example to work out, that Dewey's claim that his logic is 'scientific' probably seeks to oppose the claims of transcendentalist Santayana who challenged Dewey's naturalist monism. In other places Kaufman, a proponent of immediate empiricism in opposed. Yet despite this if I persevere with Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, I find that the author does succeed in helping me to learn to experience experience and nature in ways that can help to routinely go beyond merely revealing multiplicity again and again.

The wonder of *Experience and Nature* is that Dewey has pursued and expounded on this insight in myriad situations—histories, knowledge, communication, minds and subjects, consciousness, art, value and criticism. I find that wherever I attempt to go with that generative account of experience, Dewey has already been there. That's why *Experience and Nature* has been at the top of my book pile for many months now.



[Professor Helen Verran](#) is a philosopher who holds positions at Charles Darwin University in northern Australia, and the Norwegian University of the Arctic in northern Norway. In both positions she works with Indigenous citizens as they attempt to negotiate modern institutions.

Pile of books: © Helen Verran

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