

Project Zero 50th Anniversary

Remarks by Carlos Vasco

I am very proud of being one of those few people who can say he or she met Howard Gardner *before* he was famous. The trouble is I envy Howard, my mentor, and David Perkins, my other mentor, very much, for a simple reason: although I became 80 years old the day before yesterday, I am still *not* famous. I can't stand it.

When Daniel and the PZ veterans, Steve, Shari and other PZ guys started preparing our 50-year birthday celebration a year ago, I could still say—and Red Sox fans will recognize this line—“Wait ‘til next year!” (to catch up with Howard and David, of course). Well, as of yesterday, this line is all gone!

A year ago, I started saying to everybody I knew, including Daniel, Steve and Shari: “I still have one more year of youth to go!” (Of course, to catch up with them). Well, as of yesterday, that line is gone too. I'll have to move my zero, my own petty little Project Zero, ten years ahead on the time dimension. Well, to pro-ject from-zero-on is to start from nowhere or from anywhere; so, why not start from 80 on? They call that “life-long learning”, isn't it?

So, from now on, I will start repeating that I still have ten more years of youth to go; that might be time enough to catch up with Howard and



David. Pipe dreams, of course. But they are the ones to blame: they have been my Hamelin pied pipers for 34 years.

Fortunately, they are still younger than I. I find comfort in knowing that they cannot catch up with me in *that* ladder. But that is in the time dimension only. In the space dimension, David is taller than I! I envy him, because of his stature—his academic stature I mean—in which he is incommensurably taller than I; but at least that means I must always look up to him.

Of course, David and Howard are much taller than I in many other spatial dimensions too: especially in the vertical size of the pile of books they write. I write a lot of books, too, but mine do not add up because nobody reads them.

In fact, I confess that I have for the last 34 years studied and learned furiously every month and year, because I have always wished to know as much about intelligence, psychology and neurology as Howard, and to know as much about knowing, teaching and learning as David. Pipe dreams, of course, but that's why I come here to Hamelin—I mean to Harvard—with any excuse (or zero excuses), be it for a year or two, or a semester or two, a summer or two, or even a day or two.

I learn more from Howard or David in one lunch at the square than in one semester of post-doctoral studies. Especially if Ellen is there with Howard, or of it is a dinner at the Perkins' with Ann and Tom: there you

are forced to learn even at dinner. If you do not answer correctly 20 trivia questions, you are not allowed to eat your dessert. So I have kept coming here every year for 34 years of my life. (Mathematically speaking, that is only the smaller half of my life, but academically speaking, by far the larger half).

Now, let's go back to square one, I mean to Square Zero. (I always dream of the day when we will get to Square One).

My first encounter with Howard was in Guadalajara, Mexico, 34 years ago, when Howard and Dave were still not famous. Project Zero was already 16 years old, from the very beginning attempting to see how children learn the arts, the languages, and the sciences, starting from ZERO.

If you listened carefully, art, natural language and science, those are the three *Ways of World Making*, a few years later spelled out by Nelson Goodman, the founder, and Howard's and Dave's mentor. Indirectly, he was also my mentor through his two favorite then-young assistants, and through his two little great books, *Languages of Art* (1968) and *Ways of World Making* (1978). He was not directly my mentor, though, because in 1968 I was just getting my Ph.D. in Mathematics at Saint Louis University, more precisely, my Ph.D. in abstract, useless algebra.

Goodman had started this great project, this 50-year journey, with that manifesto, *Languages of Art*. From this little great book I learned that

the alphabetic code for writing and the mathematical code for doing abstract, useless algebra were not the only powerful codes: the music codes with tetragrams and pentagrams, and the dance codes like the Laban notation were just as marvelous.

Guadalajara was the closing event of—for me—one of the most momentous projects in the history of the GSE: The Human Development Project, funded by the Dutch Bernard van Leer Foundation. Howard Gardner announced there, for the coming fall, the book that would change my view of intelligence and of educational psychology for good: *Frames of Mind*.

In Guadalajara, I only contributed a minor piece of inter-disciplinary work: “Learning mathematics as a culturally conditioned process”; but there and then, the miracle happened: Robert Levine, Corky White, and Howard Gardner all liked my piece, and Howard invited me to come for a year to Harvard. At his request, the GSE awarded me a Schumann Fellowship to work here for a year, at the newly founded Educational Technology Center ETC, led by Judah Schwartz of MIT, who was my third mentor here: my mentor on digital technologies.

Here I met my second great mentor here, David Perkins, and a fourth: Jim Kaput at U. of Mass-Dartmouth. But I also met Jack Lochhead of U. of Mass-Amherst, Patricia Davidson at U. of Mass-Boston, and Jean Bamberger, also of MIT. How much I learned in those years 1984-85, 1989, 99-2000! I could go on for hours, but I will finish my intervention

with just two self-serving anecdotes out of a thousand from those long-gone years.

I got from Howard Gardner the biggest boost to my ego *ever* (and my ego is hard to boost: it's a super-ego!). I was preparing a mathematics education seminar on epistemology here in a small office at Longfellow Hall we called "the Cave"—for me, "Plato's Cave". One day, Howard entered the cave while I was out in the bathroom. He saw editions A and B of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* open on my desk, a Greek-to-Latin translation of Plato's *Meno*, and a yellow pad where I was taking notes in English, of all languages.

When I came back, Howard said to me (Carol Dweck wouldn't like this overgeneralized praise): "You are the last of the Renaissance polymaths!" he said. "My God... I mean, my mentor, my Howard, how can you say that!"

Suddenly I thought: "Polymath"? He shouldn't have said that, whatever he meant by "polymath", but sure he got me hooked on learning everything from the Renaissance on, and before, too. I went back from Plato and Aristotle to add Heraclitus and Parmenides to my list of mentors, behind Federici, Goodman, Gardner and Perkins. But coming from Howard Gardner, was "polymath" *a praise*? You know how pointed his words are. Ellen Winner knows well the point of words like "polymath" when spoken by Howard. Maybe Howard meant "superficial: a mile wide with zero depth", or something like it... Or

perhaps “eclectic, amateurish, sophomoric”, or “pedantic”... It’s still not clear for me what he meant, but he sure got me hooked, like many other friends I know, in life-long learning, following my pipe dreams for 34 more years: “De omni re scibili”. Thanks to you, Howard, for that praise, no matter what you meant!

Now, the second self-serving anecdote, which is about David, my alter ego, and about my even taller ego: Dave gave me another overgeneralized praise Carol Dweck would have not liked either. David and I were once upon a time with the PZ guys in a lunch about intelligence in the wild, what else. He said to them that he got more ideas in a lunch with me in the Square than he got in a semester from his colleagues at the Ed School. “My God... I mean, my mentor, my David, how can you say that!”

He shouldn’t have said that, whatever he meant by it, but sure enough, he got me hooked, like many other friends I know, in life-long learning; but watch out: coming from Dave, you have to mind his words very carefully. He was *not* accusing his colleagues for not getting new ideas: he said *more*; he is too polite to have said *less*. He did NOT say I *gave* him more ideas in a lunch, etcetera: he just said *he* got more ideas in one lunch with me than from his colleagues in one semester. I plead not guilty!

It’s still not clear to me what David meant, but he sure got me hooked on learning more and more from him, and kept me hooked on trying to

come as often as I could to Hamelin, I mean to Harvard, even for a lunch or two at the Border Café, like my birthday celebration the day before yesterday. Thanks to you, David, for that praise, no matter what you meant! You got me hooked, like many other friends I know, in life-long learning. Thank you all PZ guys too for being here today, and for bringing me here to Hamelin, I mean to Harvard.

Carlos E. Vasco