

Preface

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The essays in this collection are drawn from papers that I wrote with a group of collaborators between 1985 and 2000. During those years, I led the development of enterprises in education (Logonet Inc.), business consulting (Business Design Associates Inc.), and software (Action Technologies, inventor of “coordinator” software). The essays in this collection were prepared for clients and for our own thinking for doing our work. Each essay, with the exception of “Conversations for Action,” was initiated with a question I was exploring in our work and challenges with clients. The reflections behind “Conversations for Action” date back to my term in the Allende government in Chile, where the question of communication for getting work done first came to me. I later developed the subject in my dissertation, “Management and Communication in the Office of the Future,” at the University of California, Berkeley.

At the core of all of the essays is my understanding of language as the fundamental characteristic of what makes us human. Language has many dimensions. We have words and sounds and writing. But language also has the dimension of acts—the way that we do things with language, and that language does with us. Our rationalistic tradition, in which I was educated originally as an engineer at the Universidad Catolica in Chile, puts its emphasis on facts, the representation of facts, building models, and communicating about the truth of claims. Through life experiences, some of them tougher than others, I gained the conviction that there is a whole other world that is just as important, and no less rational—a world that is emotional, social, and historical. This is the world in which, in collaboration with others, we bring forth realities, negotiate with each other, and make history happen, all in conversations with each other. It is a world in which

language is not merely about notations of facts but also poetical and political invention.

Many of the essays in this collection were constructed in an attempt to bring this other world to people in a way that would empower them to invent a new capacity and facility of readiness to participate in this dimension of our world—to pursue new observations and new skills—and at the same to do that in practical ways, avoiding the hysteria that sometimes pervades philosophical ventures into new worlds of possibility.

I have benefited a lot from the speech act tradition developed by Professor John L. Austin at Oxford, and by Professor John Searle, with whom I did my PhD at the University of California in Berkeley. I have brought what I learned from them and from the tradition to reinterpret the world of business and relationships in a different way. Another dimension of language into which I have delved is its hermeneutical dimension: listening and learning to be receptive to our inheritance from traditions are central issues. In my learning, the towering figures in that tradition have been Martin Heidegger and Hans Gadamer. Personally, my chief teacher has been Professor Hubert Dreyfus at the University of California at Berkeley. In the background of all of this, though often not explicitly, has been my interest in our biological being, particularly in the tradition built by Professors Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, fellow Chileans and colleagues for many years.

It was during this same period, 1985-2000, that I wrote and published *Understanding Computers and Cognition* with Terry Winograd, *Building Trust In Business, Relationships, and Politics* with Bob Solomon, and *Disclosing New Worlds* with Charles Spinosa and Hubert Dreyfus.

Despite the fact that the papers that follow carry my signature, they all result from collaborations and carry the contributions of many people. The more remarkable contributions to this body of work have been Chauncey Bell, Michael Graves, Charles Spinosa, Alfred (“Bud”) Vieira, and my daughter Maria Flores Letelier, with whom I discussed, framed, drafted, and built the papers.

When we started doing this work, computers and networks were just coming along. (I first drafted *Understanding Computers and Cognition* on a Xerox Alto computer, which was one of Steve Jobs’ inspirations in designing the early Apple computers.) Providing interpretations and tools for the world that we could see was coming was one of the inspirations and motivations for all of the work since.

Today, the situation is different. The networked and computer-mediated world that I imagined is already here. This world arrives with new political

issues—threats to the environment, global warming, the prospect of serious intervention in our biological beings, and so forth—and these demand new thinking. In addition, my obligations in Chile, arising from my term as a senator and as an advisor to the government, have brought me to think about innovation, issues and policy for science and technology, and the tensions brought about by pluralistic and unequal societies. These topics are not addressed in this collection of papers. Something about my thinking on some of these issues can be found in the paper “Entrepreneurship and the wired life: Work in the wake of career,” which I wrote in 2000 with John Gray.

I am working with Terry Winograd on the questions of innovation and the new networked world, and I hope to publish something new out of that work. In what we are writing, I hope to bring some of the “old,” sampled here, along with new foundations for thinking and acting in the world at which we have arrived today, in particular for university and business audiences.

One of my most recent collaborative projects is one that I have had the pleasure to work on with my daughters Gloria and Javiera: developing skills and sensibilities for living in pluralistic networks. As I mentioned above, we now live in a global, highly connected world, yet we don’t yet know how to live together in what we call “pluralistic networks,” networks in which people of different backgrounds, nationalities, cultures, and belief systems commit to living together, respecting their differences, and collaborating to create value for each other. There are many obstacles to pluralistic networks, including social barriers, political barriers, and our own emotional backgrounds, which show up as feelings, attitudes, or prejudices. If we are unable to navigate these obstacles, we are left with a significantly weakened capacity to collaborate, to innovate, and to coordinate efficiently and effectively.

The good news is that the work that we have been doing shows that by learning new skills and sensibilities, we can learn to live and work in pluralistic networks. We have invested significant time and effort developing and delivering educational programs designed to build these kinds of skills and sensibilities. We are convinced that the traditional educational model of acquiring knowledge and applying new information does not work for this purpose. Our focus has been to create new contexts for the development of what are often referred to as the soft skills: the ability to coordinate our commitments, ability to cultivate trust, ability to listen, ability to manage moods, etc. By combining the work that we have been doing with many of our corporate clients for the last twenty years, with spaces for ontological reflection and new technologies around immersive game

play, we have been developing these contexts and enabling people to develop their abilities to work with others, despite their differences, with respect and with trust. I look forward to continuing to develop this work, and I invite you to join us in exploring, building, and playing in these spaces with us at Pluralistic Networks, Inc.

Until now, although these papers are as relevant today as when they were written, I have been reluctant to publish them, as they were written in a different context and time with a particular audience in mind. However, my daughters have convinced me that these papers are not only relevant, but that they would be useful to people in their current form without any need to update them. The existence of this collection of papers results almost entirely from my daughter Maria's discipline as a philosopher and from her love for her father. The selection of this set of papers and the editorial preparation for publication are entirely hers.

Fernando Flores
Berkeley, CA April 2012]

Introduction

By Maria Flores Letelier

Instilling a Culture of Commitment in Our Working Relationships

While the essays in this book were written sixteen to twenty years ago, I see them as more relevant today than ever. That is why I was determined, in the midst of two pregnancies and caring for newly born babies, to find a way to dig up some of the most relevant essays that my father wrote then and make them publicly available for the first time. As I re-read these essays many years later, at first I was a bit taken aback by the awkwardness of some of the writing—the grandeur of the words, the fierceness of many of the claims, and the obvious nature of many of the questions posed. Then it became clear to me that because the thinking was so new at the time, my father had to develop a whole new language to make these points. The idea that we invent reality together in the commitments we make to each other when we speak went against not only current academic thinking then about human behavior, but also our commonsense understanding of that topic at the time. He was not writing for the self-help category of books, a category that did not exist at the time. He was bringing a human dimension to the world of work, organizations, and business.

Today, it is clear to me that much of what my father was anticipating, even as far back as when he was a prisoner of the Pinochet regime in Chile, was the importance of instilling a culture of commitment in what would become a dominantly capitalistic world. His thinking goes to the heart of not only how people transact and negotiate in a capitalistic world, but also how, in coordinating, there is much more than self-interest at stake. Indeed, we are making commitments to