

# Why am I here?

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*A methodology of not-knowing*

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*In the elder care center living room the resident Sophie is wandering around. ‘I am so confused. Why am I here?’ She asks, continuously. Once in a while the care assistant Helga replies:*

*Helga: It’s because your husband passed away. It’s 18 month ago, and now you are here. Where do you live?*

*Sophie: I live on 210 Western Boulevard, Sophie says.*

*Helga: No, you live here, just down the corridor in room 6. Where do you live?*

*Sophie I live in room 6.*

*Helga: That’s fine.*

*Later, Sophie addresses the student, Peter:*

*Sophie: I’m so confused. Why am I here?*

*Peter: It’s because your husband passed away.*

*Sophie: What am I supposed to do?*

*Peter suggests that she watch TV and guides her to the sofa. Another resident, Elsa, joins her:*

*Sophie: I’m so confused. I don’t know why I’m here.*

*Elsa: I don’t know either.*

*Sophie: It’s damn annoying.*

*Elsa: Yes, but I am here right next to you.*

This is a field note from my ethnographic study on learning and innovation in the social and health care educations. Though adding no obviously insight related to my research question about expansive learning in transitions between a health care college and the elder care workplaces, I could not forget the situation. It did not make any sense. Yet it touched me and disturbed me and made me return to this page in my field diary until I knew the dialogue by heart. The call for papers on meaning-making and meaning-breaking turned out to be the hook on which to catch the idea embedded in this emotional moment of mine. Dementia could possibly be the ultimate meaning-breaking state of mind. Did these two ladies mirror a feeling only too well-known to me? Did it hold any methodological potential?

It may seem cynical to capitalize on two old citizens with dementia. I hope that the following will belie this interpretation. The experience of getting lost is human, but most of the time, we try to keep control.

However, Lather (2007) proposes a methodology of getting lost in the landscape of knowledge or the landscape of science. She argues for cultivating the ability of engaging with ‘not knowing’ and moving toward a ‘vacillation of knowing and not knowing’ (p. 136). Wandering and getting lost become methodological stances.

Dementia is involuntarily not-knowing. The researcher may also involuntarily get lost and confused, but she can make use of these experiences and make them a deliberate strategy. I use Lather’s notion of getting lost as a double lens. Firstly, I use it to immerse myself into seemingly irrelevant experiences and subjects, and secondly, I use it to sensitize myself to peoples’ feelings of lostness and not-knowing in my research field.

This methodology holds creative potentials. In his book “The act of creation” Koestler (1964) puts forward the idea that any creative act is not a simple association, but a ‘bisociation’. Koestler coins this term to mean ‘perceiving a situation in two habitually incompatible associative contexts... [which] causes an abrupt transfer of thought from one matrix to another governed by a different logic.’ (Taylor, 1999, 34). According to Koestler, *all* forms of creativity - whether in science, comedy, or art - are driven by this mechanism of bisociation. Retreating - or not-knowing - provides a better start for the bisociative jump that will be required to solve a problem. Koestler describes this process with the French phrase *reculer pour mieux sauter* – ‘to retreat for a better jump’. (Taylor, 1999, 36)

Sophie will never get a meaning making answer to why she is at the elder care center. The truth: ‘your husband is dead’ does not reduce her feeling of lostness. She will keep asking: Why am I here? Don’t we all ask that question once in a while? It is damn annoying.

However, answers might show up in unexpected ways at unexpected places, and getting company is not a bad answer.

Koestler, A. (1964). *The act of creation: A study of the conscious and unconscious in science and art*. New York: Dell Publishing Co.

Lather, P. A. (2007). *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science*. New York: State University of New York

Taylor, J. (1999). Koestler’s The Act of Creation. *Shawangunk Review, State University of New York at New Paltz*, X, 34-40.