On the Path of Hesitation

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I wish to thank Gert Biesta for directing us down an incredibly important path. He seeks to insert "hesitation" into discussions of relational pedagogies, and by this, he means that we should value the lack of understanding teachers and students have of one another, their distance from one another, and their strangeness to one another. For those of us who tend to foreground our "love" or "care" for students, and for those of us who say we "listen" to our students or "recognize" our students for who they are, I take it that Biesta is offering us a warning. We might limit the intellectual potential of educational events when we rush to predefine pedagogical relationships as close or warm or ethically defensible. Stated positively, we should appreciate the ways in which distance and strangeness can help produce dynamic intellectual play amongst students and teachers. Biesta's case for hesitation comes in the form of three cautionary arguments.

First, he argues that student-teacher interactions always involve a "gap" or a space of enunciation between the participants. Distance between participants and differences between the meanings participants assign to the exchange are essential aspects of communication, and teachers do well to appreciate, protect, and utilize the unplanned character of such spaces as vital sites of intellectual exchange. Those who would seek to "close" the gap violate what Biesta takes to be the soundest understandings of communication. Here, a teacher's drive toward connection leads to acts of force, such as when I coerce a student, through assessment mechanisms, to repeat my words verbatim.

Biesta's second caution concerning connection seeks to elevate the concept of "being addressed" above competing ways to describe educational interactions. The student, in Biesta's formulation, is already addressing us as educators; beginning with this premise, we do not postulate a "lack" on the student's part that must be remedied (as do theories of developmental psychology). In contrast to theories that call upon teachers to "listen to" or "recognize" students, Biesta seeks to emphasize the agency of students and omit references to teachers' "relational gestures." Instead of emphasizing connection, as does the metaphor of recognition, Biesta offers us a conception of distance, for the student's address to us may be warm or it may be instrumental, or it may be critical and resistant. Moreover, the distance is increased as the teacher turns inward to understand who the student is in this address and what it means to respond responsibly as the student's teacher.

Biesta's third caution against an overreliance upon metaphors of connection portrays teaching the other as a process that brings the student something from the outside, something foreign, and as such, involves a distance between the student's understanding and the knowledge to be learned, as well as between the relative authority of the student and the authority of the teacher who makes this learning possible. In an effort to move beyond the domesticated conception of learning,

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which reduces learning to an economic transaction,[1] Biesta suggests that teaching the other involves a transcendent understanding, brought to the student via a teacher with authority. Here, it is the strangeness of the teacher's message that makes revelation possible.

Even though this interpretation of Biesta's case for distance and disconnection is brief, I hope it will help us appreciate the many insights involved in his argument for hesitation. My own work has greatly benefited from Biesta's writing; he helps me with my pragmatic focus on interrupting the colonial and economic hierarchies that presently wreak havoc on educational relationships in the United States. Students who are systematically oppressed in schools — such as students from previously colonized groups and from the working class — are often subordinated and then labeled and blamed for their mistreatment. Relational pedagogies, which substitute relational ontologies for the individualistic ontologies that enable this process of subordination and blame, offer paths away from colonial and economic hierarchies, because they direct our attention to the quality of student-teacher relationships and away from the characteristics of the learner.

In the sometimes tense relationships between students from previously colonized groups and teachers, Biesta's suggestion that we respect and tend the space of enunciation between participants, that we avoid the violence involved in closing the gap, is — in important ways — preferable to an assumption of connection. Tending such gaps may involve aiding students in a process of voicing their perspectives, whether those perspectives are agreeable or disagreeable. The teacher who, in contrast, seeks to "recognize" his students, may assume a position of authority and an epistemological prerogative which allows him to miss the student's signals that she or he is pissed off at the teacher, the institution, or the society, and it may be these very signals which could lead to the most exciting educational events. In the worst-case scenario, the urge to connection may allow a teacher to justify his own "savior" orientation, which only recreates a paternalistic, hierarchical relationship with the student instead of interrupting those hierarchies. Thus, Biesta's defense of disconnection might help teachers in neocolonial contexts avoid a savior orientation.

However, this strength may also come with a weakness. Consider Paulo Freire's argument for solidarity. Freire argues that teachers of oppressed students must make an unreserved commitment to their students, to the development of their worldviews, and to an embodied effort to strengthen the students' confidence and resolve.[2] With some merit, authors have accused Freire of having a savior mentality and of being blind to the ways in which the interests of the students do not match the life course Freire's pedagogy places before them.[3] Yet, there is a fundamental truth in Freire's commitment to solidarity, namely, that humans are stronger as collective beings and learning is more possible and more powerful in collective endeavors. Students who have been beaten down by white supremacy and meritocracy can often use the intellectual and embodied support of a teacher who takes the initiative to connect with them and to offer an uncompromising site of co-intentional pedagogical *praxis*.

Biesta's portrait of student-teacher relationships avoids the savior mentality operative in Freire's works, yet it also lacks the power emerging from an uncompromising

10.47925/2012.014

commitment to solidarity. Anton Makarenko, Biesta notes, preferred not to know about the students he worked with — an orientation reflecting a sensibility many teachers have. For instance, different forms of address call out different students, and a patronizing form of address (which is more likely when one knows incriminating evidence regarding a student) is best known for calling out subdued, resistant, or withdrawn students. Biesta shares Makarenko's commitment to not knowing, and he combines that not knowing with being responsive to the student's address and with the enactment of positive *presumptions* about students. Following Glen Hudak, Biesta argues in favor of presuming that students are competent, that they are imaginative, and that they are open to intimacy. In sum, Biesta wants us to both pay attention to the student responses, to the "gaps, the fissures, and the disjunctions, the disconnections, and the strangeness that are part of educational processes and practices," *and* to look past any evidence the student gives us of incompetence, unimaginativeness, and disinterest in intimacy. It is as if teachers are most likely to create fruitful openings with students by enacting an uninformed responsiveness combined with faith. Despite the motley appearance of this position, there is much to be said on its behalf. In comparison to Freire, Biesta's suggestions here are more pluralistic and less directive, that is, by foregrounding the student's imagination and the teacher's responsiveness, by refusing to predefine the student, Biesta may well create greater room for relational openings than does Freire, who predefines students as "oppressed" and seeks to call out a particular type of student who will take control of her or his political destiny. Despite the attractiveness of Biesta's more pluralistic vision of student-teacher relationships, I must admit that I still long for the collective power embodied in Freire's conception of co-intentional education.

Biesta's third argument on behalf of educational disconnection, the suggestion that learning be conceived as a form of transcendence, is indeed powerful and motivating. This vision of learning as revelation, where a teacher brings an utterly foreign message to the student, is enough to motivate even an atheist like myself. This may indeed describe some of the most powerful learning events humans experience. However, my pragmatism militates against efforts to locate an essence of learning shared by all learning events, for I think of learning in multiple and mundane ways: from learning to spell a word to learning of one's economic and political location in society. Further, my commitment to relational ontologies makes it difficult for me to grasp Biesta's suggestion that transcendent learning comes to the student from the outside: when humans are always already connected to others around them, to others in their history, to the others that create their languages, what is outside the individual? If we focus on the quality of student-teacher relationships, the Socrates of the *Meno* was not "outside" the slave boy; rather, the boy's responses were the fruit of his relationship with Socrates. And speaking of the slave boy, my commitments to interrupting colonial legacies lead me to balk at the idea that learning must be accompanied by a teacher with authority. For educators seeking to interrupt colonial legacies, it is most critical that subaltern students exercise authority in educational events, build from their knowledge, and that they do not confer undue authority on knowledge brought to them from the outside. All this is

10.47925/2012.014

fundamental to the decolonial pedagogies of Freire and others.[4] That said, it does seem to me that people from all economic and social locations in society yearn for the transcendent learning Biesta describes. I simply prefer that transcendent learning be considered a rare and rich event.

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1. Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 19–20.

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 31–32.

3. Gustavo Esteva, Dana Stuchul, and Madhu Prakash, "From a Pedagogy for Liberation to Liberation from Pedagogy," in *Rethinking Freire*, eds. Chet A. Bowers and Frédérique Apffel-Marglin (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).

4. For example, Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

10.47925/2012.014