

Educational Borderlands: Rigidities, Transparencies, and Porosities

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Educational relationships are often studied as if they exist primarily within self-contained entities.¹ Reviews of empirical work on teacher-student relationships, for example, are replete with methodologies that emphasize (often self-report) observations or perceptions of individual participants, rather than descriptions of relational interactions or patterns.²

A classic example of an assumption of self-contained relationality is in the internal working models proposed by attachment theory.³ Although originating in early relationships (e.g., with parents), these working models are conceived as internalized, encoded in the brains of individuals, and to be drawn upon in shaping future relationships (e.g., in school contexts). As self-contained representations, attachment models are often conceptualized as “difficult to access and consequently resistant to change.”⁴

Conversely, contemporary feminist theory has conceptualized teacher-student relationships using maternal, even prenatal metaphors.⁵ On this view, individuals, although bounded entities, are constantly connected as through porous membranes (e.g., homes, communities, classrooms). Thus, relational patterns may be continuously enacted by individuals in relationship, and an alteration in the relationship on the one hand may be immediately felt on the other. Noddings highlighted both the difference between and interdependence of receivers and givers of care. She also contrasted her ethic of care with what she described as a masculine emphasis on abstract or rationalistic conceptions and described the difference between these conceptions as a “chasm.”⁶ However, she also suggested that this chasm might be transcended through dialogue.

Such relational views highlight the liminality of relationships in which the other is encountered at a shared boundary with the self. Such

boundaries, like the borders between nations or states, can at once be both rigid and porous as they simultaneously shape self and other. Altering a set boundary without consent of the other will likely result in some form of injury and, perhaps, strong resistance or reciprocal violence. However, even with rigid boundaries in place, the influence of the other can be immediately felt at the shared boundary, suggesting porosity. Hence at the boundary of a state, one will often recognize strong influences from a bordering state, such that the furthest reaches of a state on the east and west may be nearly as different from one another culturally as the eastern neighbor is from the western. Such recognition of mutual influence also depends in part on the transparency of the boundary. A boundary “wall” conceals, whereas a window, although rigid and non-porous, reveals. A recognition of such boundary elements has the capacity to reveal the profoundly moral nature of relationships.

The current essay endeavors to describe how teachers and students might jointly explore the nature of boundaries in educational contexts as a *primary* educational aim and suggests three ways in which student-teacher relationships, as well as conceptual and disciplinary relationships, might be understood at such boundaries: by recognizing the rigidity, transparency, or porosity of the boundary.

DIVERGENT PURPOSES

The presumed purposes of education are multifaceted and, in some cases, divergent. Where divergent they have been described by Kieran Egan as contentious.⁷ One example is in Noddings’s previously mentioned description of a “chasm” between masculine and feminine ethics, each with different pedagogical implications. Jones similarly contrasted what she described as a “dominant Western model of the autonomous individual subject” with a feminist model that emphasizes dependency.⁸ However, rather than describing a chasm between these, Jones suggests that they might be somehow interdependent by suggesting that there might be some ways in which dependency makes “independence possible.”⁹

Similarly, other theorists have identified socialization and individualization as both being legitimate educational purposes.¹⁰ However, like Noddings, Egan highlighted what he saw as incompatibilities between these purposes: one representing a pull toward individualization, and another representing a pull toward socialization. Part of the challenge seems to be the difficulty in conceptualizing relationality and an attendant difficulty drawing pragmatic implications,¹¹ such as for relational practices and assessments. Thus, even systems-focused educators may nod to the system while working first with this individual and then with that individual. Rarely do we conceptualize assessments as pertaining to relationships rather than entities. Does this “B” grade belong to the teacher, the student, both, or to a broader community? Is ADHD within the student or within the classroom relationships? Are working models “internal,” or do they describe ongoing patterns of relational interaction, and is it *persons* or *relationships* that have qualities of “security” or “insecurity”?

Another difficulty is the potential of conceptualizing the system itself in self-contained, atomistic ways, as the “Borg” of *Star Trek* fame, in which the individual is primarily a cog in a wheel, and the system as a whole is all that matters—floating around in space until it bumps up against other systems and either assimilates them, is assimilated by them, or is repelled. Pi-anta emphasizes educational systems and systems within systems. We can see the individual potentially getting lost in his view of systems as he describes an “equipotentiality” of parts that might exist “early in the development of a system” (e.g., “In the beginning of the school year, before roles are created for students”) such that different “units” within a system have the potential to “perform each other’s function.” This, he writes, “refers to something like replaceability and can make a system very flexible.” He uses the example of a teacher stepping in to fill the role of an absent colleague and describes how this equipotentiality creates the possibility for quick “recovery” when a part is lost but also “carries redundancy and, at times, inefficiency.”¹² With such relational approaches we have a risk of losing the individual in the system, of losing the “singular” in original “plurality,”¹³ or of seeing relation as “more

real than the things it brings together” such that if we “pull relations out... [we] find no self.”¹⁴

Multiculturalism exists as a contrast (or counterpoint?) to this sort of assimilative “melting pot” model. However, researchers often describe diverse political, cultural, religious and ethnic groups in primarily atomistic ways as cohesive, self-contained entities instead of recognizing ways in which each group might invoke the other, as also individual identities might invoke each other. Piaget recognized both assimilation and accommodation as necessary and continuous organizing processes, and both as interactive between the individual and the environment. Like Jones’s conceptualization of dependencies giving rise to independencies, assimilative processes might give rise to accommodative processes (or disequilibrium to equilibrium) and vice versa. There is no plural without the singular, no relation without the individual. One might wonder why ontological primacy of either relations or individuals must be assumed when our daily experience seems to be simultaneity.

EDUCATION AT THE BOUNDARY

A view of individuals and relations at shared boundaries, where each necessitates the other, allows us to simultaneously reveal both the individual and the relationship. If this simultaneity *is* reality (present or original), then the primary purpose of education might be best described as *cognizing*, or *recognizing*, this reality. Although the word cognition in the English-speaking world has come to suggest an intra-personal act of thinking or knowing, in its original meaning cognition denotes a shared experience. From “cognoscere” (“co-knowledge,” or knowing with or together), Latin languages derived words like *conocer* and *conoscere*, suggesting a form of interpersonal or relational knowing. These contrast with words suggesting an individualistic experience of “knowing about,” such as *saber* and *sapere*.¹⁵ The question of how we might know things *together* has gained some attention in the last decade.¹⁶

With the semantic altering of the word “cognition” in English seems to have come a pedagogical emphasis on individualistic “learning about,” in

which the purposes of education become encapsulated within students. In contrast, we might conceive of an education in which learning is cognizing, or recognizing, in this older sense: specifically, a joint recognition between students and teachers at the boundaries that shape such things as concepts, operations (mental, emotional, or physical), disciplines, communities, states, and interpersonal relations—including those between teachers and students. It is at the boundaries, then, that we might begin to recognize relationships while simultaneously recognizing entities.

With this emphasis on boundaries, at least three taxonomies present themselves as possible pedagogical tools, with recognition (knowing together again) as our educational purpose: rigidity, porosity, and transparency. The rigidity of a boundary refers to the potential of altering the boundary, of moving it this way or that, bending or reshaping it, or of removing it altogether. Levinas describes the boundary between self and Other as rigid, with the Other as fundamentally external, and a violation of that Otherness as “totalization,” a conceptual destruction or reformulation of boundaries.¹⁷ With less rigidity, and especially with informed consent, some boundaries might be reshaped. For example, a neighbor recounts how his high school history teacher became frustrated with this student’s talking in class. Finally, he said, “If you want to do the talking, how about you teach the lesson next time?” My neighbor took the teacher up on the offer, and not wanting to look foolish in front of his friends, diligently studied the content for the following class meeting and delivered it so successfully that the other students erupted into spontaneous applause. Although perhaps not the outcome for which the teacher had hoped, he admitted that my neighbor had done a nice job teaching the content and asked if he would like to continue to teach the class. The once flexible boundary between student and teacher quickly snapped back into place when my neighbor quipped, “No, that’s your job, unless you want to also give me your paycheck!” However, the “damage” of that temporarily altered boundary was done. The brief high of success and applause while in the role of “teacher” had permanently altered my neighbor such that he determined in that moment to become a teacher, and more than

three decades later he happily persists in the profession.

A boundary might remain rigid, and yet be porous, allowing a flow of information and influence across the boundary. The boundary, if somewhat rigid, still shapes the nature of the information and influence that crosses it. This is a persistent hope of many educators that they might influence their students across a fairly rigid “teacher-student” boundary—that they may “teach,” and their students may “learn.” Some of the better teachers, while remaining teachers, become aware and responsive to a reciprocal influence of students across that boundary. Other teachers, while still influenced across the boundary, may be less cognizant of that influence, becoming reactive rather than responsive—or treating students as containers into which they might pour information, rather than as co-knowers in the relationship. Where there is little porosity between self and other, we might become like “co-coons” to each other.¹⁸

Somewhat independent of rigidity and porosity, a boundary might be more or less transparent. By transparent I mean allowing a view or perspective of the other from the position of the one (and vice versa). In the teacher-student relationship, transparency asks, “What is revealed about the teacher from the view of the student, and vice versa? What is concealed?” A teacher’s ability to assess student learning depends on the idea that the teacher-student boundary is somewhat transparent, that the teacher can see things about the student that students might or might not see about themselves or about each other. Grading assumes some level of transparency, and where grading fails to capture the student’s experience (as it so often does) we might point to a failure of transparency at the teacher-student boundary. Similarly, student ratings of their teachers, and student recommendations or warnings about teachers to other students, suggest transparency (or lack thereof) in the other direction. By reading student ratings and comments, I have often been made aware of things about my own teaching to which I was previously blind. I have also sometimes been made aware of my own lack of transparency and of the need to better explain my reasons and intentions to my students.

Recognition of (knowing together again) such boundaries between self and other, between student and teacher, between this concept and that, this operation or that, this ideology and that, is part of the moral purpose of education, and a lack of recognition represents a failure of moral education. An emphasis on recognition is also simply pedagogically sound when it comes to understanding the boundaries between such things as teachers and students, and various operations, concepts, and disciplines. In an art class we might find that the natures of light and shadow, as well as the relationships between them, are best revealed at their shared boundaries. This boundary might be fairly rigid, as at a sharp edge, or less so along a contour. Sometimes light breaks through a porous barrier, as the dappled light in the cast shadow of a tree. And, of course, the transparency and opacity of boundaries (e.g., of shapes and colors) are concepts familiar to artists.

Similarly, in a math class, the nature of addition and subtraction are best revealed in light of one another (transparency). The boundary between these processes appears quite rigid and non-porous early on, but these attributes of the boundary might seem to change when we introduce things like negative numbers, multiplication and division, order of operations, fractions, and exponents. A boundary between maths and arts might also appear rigid, nonporous and opaque, until a student learns (like I finally did in college) that many artistic forms are achieved through geometry, and some of the forms taken by mathematics have foundations in the arts (such as Pythagoras' musical ratios, and Galton's composite portraiture).

CONCLUSION

The divergent purposes of education, as well as the tensions between individuality and relationality so prevalent therein, might be united by a common emphasis on recognition at the boundaries—such as self-other boundaries, teacher-student boundaries, operational boundaries, conceptual boundaries, and disciplinary boundaries. A reformulation of education as recognition (knowing together again) at such boundaries reveals not only the nature of both entities and relationships, but also the profoundly moral nature of education in which the rigidity, porosity, and transparency of bound-

aries have real moral consequences.

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