

Theorizing Gifts and Gifting in Education Outside of Schooling

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Gift-giving in education is “impossible.” It is also “aneconomic,” “limitless,” and must be “forgotten” — that is, if one looks at education through the Derridean lens of the gift.¹ In what follows, I will utilize the *aporias* of the gift disclosed by Jacques Derrida to analyze a scenario under which school can shake off the socially imposed structure named “schooling.” I will do so in order to offer readers different ways of thinking about school.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND SCHOOLING

Events that are educational — encounters between two or more that leave a mark, a gift, or learning² in one, some, or all those involved — happen anywhere and at any time. We learn from books, we learn at performances, and now we even learn from lectures on the Internet. Unfortunately, in many circles, education has for a long time been reduced to *schooling*. My aim is to offer ways of theorizing education beyond the confines of schooling, though also possibly within school itself, as in the example offered in this essay.

My definition of school is both simple as well as distinct from what I have thus far called schooling. In what follows, I will return frequently to this important distinction. “School” refers to the time and place where people come together with the specific intention of partaking in teaching-and-learning. Though these novel ways of looking at school may seem reminiscent of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons’s book *In Defence of the School*, my definition does not necessarily entail — nor does it exclude — their notion of school as a time and space for society to renew itself.³ However, my ideas on school diverge drastically from Masschelein and Simons’s in many ways, specifically in their construction of school solely as a space for free time. I rely instead more heavily on the work of John D. Caputo in order to describe and develop my definition of school. I agree with Caputo that all education is an event. School is therefore the place where every occurrence can be considered an event in a certain sense, and I would add that it can be considered specifically a teaching-and-learning event.

If seen as a place where events occur, school also becomes the scene of gifting, and the metaphor of gifting supplies us (as theoreticians) with a lens that distinguishes giving-and-taking and teaching-and-learning from the traditional schooling model, thus opening multiple possibilities for understanding school in a nonschooling sense. Examples of possible ways of integrating the model or metaphor of the gift into school have been suggested by Ana M. Martínez-Aleman, who has written about gifting models in higher education,⁴ Ho-chia Chueh, who has analyzed literacy education for immigrants in Taiwan through the Derridean lens of the gift,⁵ and Genevieve Vauphan and Eila Estolas, who have looked at applying the metaphor to early childhood education.⁶

As opposed to school, “schooling” is the rigid superstructure of a universal, public, and compulsory institution. It has rules, guidelines, and a very specific *telos*: the eventual inclusion of the young into the economy. The education offered in schooling must follow a curriculum (no matter how flexible) and comply with state or national mandates. It runs K through 12, but has also absorbed higher education into its normative way of being, to the point where all institutionalized education as we know it today is caged into Schooling. If school is the place and time where people come together with the specific intention of partaking in teaching-and-learning, schooling is a “form” imposed from without with the purpose of structuring and limiting what is actually a limitless reality.

To what end is schooling imposed on the school? Who is behind this imprisonment of the school? Schooling as universalized formal education has been characterized by circularity and economics, by exchange through a model of giving and taking and giving back — by a model of circulation. The state offers free education to all its citizens, and the citizens in turn acquire the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the growth of the national economy. Innumerable discourses on education have been put into place to ensure the circular flow necessary for schooling to meet its economic objective. The discourses highlighted by the terms “potentiality” and “effective teaching” are among the many examples produced by this economic machinery in order to keep it running. Both potentiality and effective teaching will be addressed and juxtaposed with the Derridean gift model later in this essay.

FOUR CONDITIONS FOR THE DERRIDEAN GIFT

In what follows, I will provide an account of the concept of “gift” developed by Derrida. I will then proceed to utilize an element of this account — “the impossible” — as a lens through which to look at education in school in a specific way. To do so, I will narrate an educative event that took place in a classroom — and is nevertheless outside of schooling — and analyze that event through the Derridean lens of the gift.

In his book, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Derrida mentions — in no particular order — the many traits a gift must have in order to be considered a true gift,⁷ or what Caputo in his essay “Teaching the Event: Deconstruction, Hauntology, and the Scene of Pedagogy” calls “the *aporias* of the gift.”⁸ I have identified and systematized the following conditions or *aporias*:

1. It must be impossible: In his essay “Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From ‘Learning From’ to ‘Being Taught By,’” Gert Biesta gives the following definition of “the impossible” in the Derridean sense: “The impossible” does not refer to that which is not possible but to “that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility.”⁹ Hence, the gift becomes “impossible” when it is some “thing” that “cannot be foreseen as a possibility.” If the giver cannot foresee the giving of the gift — because it represents only one in a million possible scenarios, and is therefore unthinkable prior to the donating of the thing — then that which is given is truly a gift. But if the donor recognizes what he is about to give as a gift, then the impossible element of the gift disappears, and that which is given is no longer considered a gift (*GT*, 13–14). In Derrida’s words, “If he recognizes it as gift, if the gift appears to him

as such, if the present is present to him as present, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift" (*GT*, 13).

2. It must be forgotten: "As soon as the gift is given the gift begins to annul itself."¹⁰ If, on the contrary, the gift does not annul itself because it is recognized as a gift, the donee of the gift will probably identify the need to repay the donor, in this way giving rise to a circle of exchange more akin to the prevailing economic model than to that of free giving. Therefore, the gift must be forgotten as such, and, although the gift itself remains with the donee, the fact of giving itself must fade. Forgetting is not construed by Derrida as a destructive force but rather as "an affirmative condition of the gift" (*GT*, 35). Remembering the gift and keeping it as such would annihilate the gift status of the thing given because it reminds the donee of his or her debt by its very existence. Only when forgetting the gift as such is it affirmed as a gift. Derrida writes the following phrases which speak directly to the notion of impossibility and forgetting: "the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or the donor. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift. Neither the "one" nor the "other." If the other perceives or receives it, if he or she kept it as a gift, the gift is annulled" (*GT*, 14). Forgetting the fact that the gift was given at all confirms its status as a gift.
3. It must be aneconomic, that is, it must interrupt the economy (*GT*, 7) and must be disruptive of the circular form of this economy (*GT*, 9): "There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the (round) symbol" (*GT*, 13). The economic system works by exchange, it is marked by a give and return. The market economy follows this particular round movement, such that when something is given to a donee, something else must be given in return to the donor. But in order for a gift to satisfy Derrida's aneconomic requirement, the donor must receive nothing in return for what he or she has given. Derrida emphasizes this characteristic of the gift by stating "(the gift) must not circulate, it must not be exchanged" and "if the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain aneconomic" (*GT*, 7).
4. It must be limitless: Derrida assigns a very particular idea of transcendence to the gift. For him, limitlessness does not refer to the fact that the gift comes from outside of the self or that it comes from the other. Rather, in this case, limitlessness alludes to the enormity of the gift. Gifts transcend all limits and borders and cannot be withheld by any framework or casing. Derrida writes in his text, *The Gift of Death*, of "the frameless immensity that must in general (in-define) a gift as such,"¹¹ and thus reminds the reader of the infinity of the gift: "The gift, if there is any, will always be without border" (*GT*, 91). The gift cannot be contained in space and time. It is never clear where it begins and where it ends, and it takes place both before and after the fact — never contained only in the present (*GT*, 13). It is transcendent in the sense that it is infinite.

In sum, for a “thing” to be considered a gift according to Derrida’s *aporias*, it must be impossible, forgotten, *aneconomic*, and limitless. I believe that it is both theoretically possible and valuable to utilize these four categories as lenses to understand and analyze gifting in education, especially as we traditionally consider their opposites — predictability, memory, circularity, containment — to be the guiding principles in the type of education which we have reduced to schooling. For this essay, however, I will focus solely on the analysis of the first condition. By looking at education through the lens of the impossible, events in education allow for different modes of perception, conception, and theorization.

“EFFECTIVE TEACHING” AND POTENTIALITY IN SCHOOLING

Contrary to the concept of gifting possible in school, *schooling* emphasizes so-called “effective teaching.” Effective teaching instrumentalizes both teachers and students. On the one hand, it utilizes teachers as the generators of a loop. Such a loop ensures that what is offered by teachers in schooling be something other than a gift because, as we have seen, one of the conditions of gifting is the gift’s ability to break the circle or loop of exchange. When the focus is on circularity and exchange, education follows a market economy model that distances itself from real gifting, which must be without return. To highlight the circularity of effective teaching, I offer George Brown and Madeleine Atkins’s comparison of effective teaching versus successful teaching:

Effective teaching is sometimes equated with successful teaching, that is, the students learn what is intended.... Effective teaching is concerned not only with success but also with appropriate values. A lecturer may teach Anglo-Saxon grammar so successfully that all the class pass the examination — and then drop Anglo-Saxon. Was the lecturer an effective teacher?¹²

The closing question in this passage is clearly rhetorical. If the students drop Anglo-Saxon after the aforementioned successful evaluation, they sever the circle of exchange in schooling. It is not enough for students to learn what they were intended to learn at the outset, but they must continue learning and growing in that specific field. An effective teacher would foster a growing interest rather than mere momentary attention. In this instance, which brings John Dewey to mind, a teacher is effective when the student not only learns what is being taught but also engages in an ever-evolving process of questioning that leads to more “learning” on the subject — not a bad thing *per se*, but it becomes problematic when appropriated by the economic circle.

Both successful teaching and effective teaching are used as tools in schooling in order to make sure all teaching leads to direct learning. However, in ideal effective teaching the knowledge, skills, and/or values that correspond to a specific teaching moment *must* absolutely match what the teacher has outlined in his or her goals, which at the same time must meet certain state and even national criteria and standards. These standards have been created to ensure the reciprocity of the citizen to the state, where, in payment for their education, citizens contribute their skillset and their potentiality. This is the instrumentalization of students in schooling, which runs parallel to the instrumentalization of the teacher outlined above.

In his book *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality*,¹³ Tyson Lewis diagnoses an overuse of the concept of potentiality in policies and national debates, in national reforms, and in higher education. These policies inform citizens that each child's "potential" can be fulfilled if the quality of teaching improves. More importantly, the discourse on "potential" has been utilized to satisfy economic needs by instrumentalizing students and their skills. As Lewis writes, "potentiality is linked directly to the question of economic viability and human capital."¹⁴

Moreover, in the generalized discourse, a person's "potential" needs to constantly evolve in a lifelong process of learning. Once you've reached your potential at any level of schooling, you enter a new stage where you need to develop that potential further. Once you've been integrated into the working economy, you need to develop that potential even more. And when you have reached that next level of potentiality within the working economy, in order to keep moving, in order to keep boosting that economy, you must actualize that potential yet again. This creates the never-ending, so-called virtuous circle of lifelong learning as it instills the need to constantly return to educational institutions, to fulfill the development of a person's potential over and over again.

Schooling, especially when viewed from the models of effective teaching and "potential," follows a very rigid cause-effect model: each fact, skill, or value learned must correspond to an exact teaching moment or string of teaching moments. To each teaching moment must correspond specific, predictable, traceable — and now with the accountability movement — visible and quantifiable learning that will develop the student's potential and absorb him or her into the economic model. In schooling, therefore, there is no room for gifting if gifting implies a break with the circular, with the economic and with the predictable.

TEACHING AS THE IMPOSSIBLE GIVING OF GIFTS

If we turn to Biesta's notion — that the impossible is that which cannot be foreseen — and apply it to everyday occurrences in schools as seen through the lens of Derridean gifting, then the masquerade of school as schooling can begin to dissolve. School as a space for gifting does not need effective teaching; on the contrary, it needs impossible teaching. In order to analyze this proposition of impossible teaching, I shall resort to the interpretation of an authentic, on-the-ground narrative of an educative event. This narrative has been taken from a field-based study where researchers observed and described everyday occurrences in schools in the New York City area, and it uniquely portrays the condition of impossibility under which gifting in the classroom can indeed happen. The example helps us visualize a different kind of education in schools, peeling away the layers imposed by schooling until only the interaction of those present at the event remains, and the schooling superstructure can be left in the shadow.

One morning in October, Earl, an 11th grade English teacher, is about to initiate a new unit with his class on August Wilson's play entitled "Fences." He reminds his 20 students that the first thing they'll do is use, as he puts it, "an opinionator to activate your knowledge." Since the play triggers questions of tolerance and forgiveness, Earl poses several questions about

the students' own attitudes toward forgiveness. After he enunciates a question, students get out of their seats and gather in one or another corner of the room where there is a hand-drawn sign reflecting their view: "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree." Earl's final question is whether people should forgive their parents, including for what they may feel were egregious mistakes and failures.

This question provokes strong opinions from the class. Most students argue that forgiveness is ultimately the way to go. Patrizia, a student who does not agree, offers a range of comments about how harmful bad parenting can be. She engages her peers energetically, time and again parrying their counter-arguments.

The discussion becomes heated, though not *ad hominem* (the teacher has worked hard, since their first day of school, to help the class avoid such a turn.) Suddenly Patrizia, in the very midst of saying "parents just have to be accountable," shakes her head vigorously and falls silent. She rushes to her chair by the far wall and, taking her seat, lowers her head on her arms. A tall girl, Cornelia, with whom she had been debating, goes over and, brushing the girl's knee with her hand, asks "You okay, Patrizia?" The teacher, Earl, also goes over and, kneeling down to eye level, asks if she is okay. Patrizia keeps her head down and offers no response. Meanwhile the class has been returning to their seats, sensing that the opinionator activity is over.

Earl turns on an overhead and shows the class the title page from their edition of August Wilson's play. He asks students about possible associations with the single word that forms the title, "Fences." On the overhead he jots down their ideas, while encouraging students to do the same in their notebooks. Within a minute or so of the start of this activity, Patrizia raises her head from her arms and follows the discussion, taking notes as do the other students. She appears calm and composed. Suddenly she sneezes. In that very instant, Cornelia and the teacher both say "Bless you," in a gentle but firm tone that sounds almost rehearsed in its two-part harmony.¹⁵

Earl, as a teacher within the schooling structure, had designed a lesson. His lesson must have had clear written objectives that were satisfactory to the standards of the system he operates in. The opinionator served a purpose within that schema. However, as is evident in the narration, the lesson took a very unexpected and emotional turn. The unexpected attitude and actions of Patrizia highlight the impossible condition of the Derridean gift. As educators, teachers plan their lessons ahead and predict outcomes. If we refer back to effective teaching, then the gap between the planned outcomes and the objectives stated in a lesson plan should be minimal. However, as in this example, a teacher may propose an objective with his or her lesson and, in reality, the appropriation of the lesson, regardless of what the teacher intends the student to learn, will always be unique to the student. The reality of a specific thing learned by a student can never be fully foreseen. Earl, as teacher, can foresee possibilities, but none of the scenarios in his head — it does not matter if they are thousands or if they are catered to a specific student's needs — will ever accurately predict how a student makes the lesson her own. There was no way of planning how and what Patrizia, in this case, would take away from the opinionator exercise. There was no way Earl could have predicted this scenario because predicting is "impossible," just as in gifting it is impossible for the gift to be truly a gift if it is seen as such or acknowledged by both the donor and the donee.

Under this view the teacher can only ever give gifts, and thus the question arises: is teaching even possible? All learning as gift is impossible where "the impossible" is understood as that which cannot be foreseen. A teacher can presuppose learning, but that which is learned will never be the exact copy of the presupposed notion of

learning in the teacher's plans. In this sense, Ivan Illich emphasizes that even the most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction.¹⁶ All learning is always an unforeseen possibility, all learning is always given as a gift. As Brown and Atkins write, "Students may not always learn what we intend and they may, sometimes alas, also learn notions which we did not intend them to learn."

Similarly, but with different language, Caputo recognizes what I call the impossibility of teaching and he defines as inventiveness in his text on Derrida's gift. He writes,

The *aporia* of the school is to have administrators who do not produce administered institutions and to conduct "programs" that do not program the school, that do not bind and coerce the event. That means the program must be in-ventive, which means that it let something break in, so that in the end no one, neither the planners nor the implementers of the program, can know exactly where it will lead.... The program is not meant to program. It must be inventive in the double sense: as carefully planned as possible, but also designed to inject the system with chance, to allow entry to the aleatory.¹⁷

Even though I have broadened the scope of "planners" to include not just the administrators but also the teachers, the premise is the same: there is no way to foresee where an event will lead. What I have dubbed the *aporia* of the impossible, Caputo refers to here as the in-ventive. Much like looking at teaching as impossible, looking at teaching as in-ventive will also create a break in the system, the same break I have proposed: there is never a foreseeable outcome to a teacher's lesson, no matter how long it takes to plan, or how well the teacher knows his or her pupils.

I concur with Caputo when he refers to the double sense of the inventive. With or without the impossible in mind, teachers set the stage with carefully planned lessons. However, the event where/when the lesson is enacted, and where/when the gift is given, becomes free-form as it unfolds. The lesson becomes a gift in the event itself because the teacher does not recognize precisely what he or she is giving; the gift is after all limitless and cannot be bound by any plan. My only reservation about the passage from Caputo is the belief that teachers and students "allow" entry to the aleatory. The force of the aleatory — the unforeseen — pushes in whether it is allowed or not.

CONCLUSION

Two highly important parts of schooling as a superstructure are effective teaching and the actualization of potentiality, which alludes to having each teaching moment accounted for and translated into a specific skill, or fact, or value in students' learning. Once we see educative events through the Derridean lens of the impossibility of the gift, the idea of such a rigidly causal model as "effective teaching" becomes risible, school begins to shed the layers of schooling imposed on it, and we thus begin to see the authentic educative event as an essential part of school in spite of the schooling superstructure that initially obscures our vision. School is always there — and has always been there — where and when people come together to teach-and-learn. Schooling might obstruct our perception of school, but the everyday brush of students and teachers in the same building at the same time overcomes the imposed modern superstructure. The true essence of school can only be seen by observing the events as they unfold, just as they did for Patrizia and Earl.

The way we think about things leads to ways of acting. Theorizing education leads to changes in practice. What I have done by highlighting the impossible condition of the gift when gifting occurs in school hopefully invites the reader to visualize education as inside the institution yet outside of schooling, or in spite of schooling. I have followed in a tradition set forth by Jean-Jacques Rousseau with regard to thinking about education. Just as he did before me, I, too, wish to “turn public attention in this direction” — the direction of the true gift — and hope my ideas will “cause others to give birth”¹⁸ to different ways of theorizing about school from outside the confines of schooling.

The acknowledgement that what I write here will have an unforeseeable influence on the reader may serve to annul this essay, allowing it to become a gift to the reader. I will start to forget about it once this last word has been written.

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1. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
 2. Throughout the essay I have chosen to use the term “learning(s)” not exclusively as a verb, but as a noun. The Spanish word *aprendizaje* alludes to that which has been learnt, be it a piece of knowledge, a skill or a value; it is in that sense that I will utilize the term.
 3. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defence of the School. A Public Issue*, trans. Jack Martin (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture and Society Publishers, 2013), 10.
 4. Ana M. Martínez-Alemán, “The Nature of the Gift: Accountability and the Professor-Student Relationship,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39, no. 6 (2007): 574–591.
 5. Ho-chia Chueh, “Exploring ‘Gift’ Theories for New Immigrants’ Literacy Education in Taiwan,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no.10 (2012): 1110–1120.
 6. Genevieve Vaughan and Eila Estola, “The Gift Paradigm in Early Childhood Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39, no.3 (2007): 246–263.
 7. Derrida, *Given Time*. This work will be cited as *GT* in the text for all subsequent references.
 8. John D. Caputo, “Teaching the Event: Deconstruction, Hauntology, and the Scene of Pedagogy,” *Philosophy of Education* 2012, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 23.
 9. Gert Biesta, “Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From ‘Learning From’ to ‘Being Taught By,’” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 5 (2013): 452 (emphasis in original).
 10. Caputo, “Teaching the Event,” 24.
 11. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 52.
 12. George Brown and Madeleine Atkins, *Effective Teaching in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 5.
 13. Tyson Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
 14. *Ibid*, 2.
 15. David Hansen, Jason Thomas Wozniak, and Ana Cecilia Galindo-Diego, “Fusing Philosophy and Fieldwork in a Study of Being a Person in the World: An Interim Commentary,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33, no.3 (2014): 159–170.
 16. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harrow Books, 1972), 18.
 17. Caputo, “Teaching the Event,” 32.
 18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books), 33.