

Narrowing the Gap Between Difference and Identity

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Biesta begins his paper by challenging our understanding of education as initiation, which, he argues, is typified by the transmission metaphor. Education as transmission, he tells us, presumes the privileging of identity, the assurance of commonality among participants over any perceived or possible differences, and the activity of a teacher at the expense of a passive learner. He contends that the transmission metaphor is a flawed one on which to base an explanation of either the process or outcomes of education. Drawing upon Dewey, Arendt, and Derrida, Biesta argues for an understanding of education as a mode of social interaction predicated upon and distinguished by difference, not identity.

What underlies his critique of education as initiation into a common world is that the child actively participates in his/her education in specific and singular ways, thereby defying any move to fix education as the matching of educative input on the part of the educator with educative output on the part of the child. Further, precisely because education is a social interaction, or better, a co-constructive, performative process, in the Deweyan sense, any notions of one individual transmitting something to another, and thereby extending a logic of identity, is unfounded and unwarranted. I want to suggest how the dichotomy posed by Biesta around difference and identity can be blunted if ethical and political concerns are brought into the discussion.

While the need for preserving the active, individual engagement of the learner in a notion of pedagogy, particularly one claiming to educate for/in a democracy, is fundamental, our understanding of education as performativity requires recognition of the kinds of moral and political commitments a teacher brings to the learning environment “so that,” as Dewey says, “this reaching out of an experience [by a learner] may be fruitfully rewarded and kept continuously active.”¹ We might ask, What are the underpinnings of teacher judgment and how do they influence student performance? What publicly stated values affirmed and demonstrated by the teacher might prevent student performance from becoming routinized, stale and miseducative? As Burbules has convincingly argued, there *is* a place in dialogue for authority, and this is not necessarily inimicable to communicative norms of mutual respect and reciprocity.² If we assume that the teacher is more mature than the child and is responsible for nourishing the critical skills that would be employed in the kinds of educative experiences Biesta and I value, it would seem that timely, intelligent, and morally informed intervention into the student’s performance is crucial. Of course, this intervention is not a risk free situation for the teacher. The act of teaching requires the presence of “the free critical judgment of the student’s mind.”³ A matter of ethical and political import, this responsibility to risk one’s beliefs and to expose them to the critical gaze of the child requires some initiation of the student by the teacher into the norms of rational discussion, some deliberate attention to the kinds of processes persons rely upon to determine what they know and how strongly or weakly they know it.

Biesta remains unconvinced that what happens “inside” the child can be determined. But given the dominant presence of psychology in education, are there other grounds for remaining cautious? Is it around the strong tendency in psychology to construct universalizing claims about what is developmentally appropriate for children? Is it the twisting of difference into a therapeutics of deviance? Is it a concern about the regulation of normality and the harmful consequences rendered in the effort to capture, explain, and remediate what is not normal? Since subjects are constituted through a braiding of power and knowledge, to simply state that it is neither possible nor relevant to know the subjective states of the child, and not disclose the political and ethical concerns he brings to this claim, diminishes the urgency and import of Biesta’s assertion for educators.

Derrida is useful in working through these kinds of questions. As Biesta indicates, Derrida fully accepts and embraces the risk of being misunderstood in a social interaction. Derrida shows us how we *always* run the unavoidable risk of violating the other when we speak by appropriating and folding otherness into the meaning we make and the positions we take. Our awareness of the other, our “letting-be” of that which remains outside of a logic of identity thrusts us outward into a field of ethico-political responsibilities. Acknowledging the risk of being mis- or not understood presents itself as an opportunity to listen carefully. This uncertainty in Derrida, Cornell believes, “reminds us to care for difference....The care for difference needs a generosity that does not attempt to grasp what is other as one’s own.”⁴ Derrida is not suggesting that we can actually avoid speaking through some logic of identity, but, rather, that in remaining continuously attentive to what remains, to difference, we increase our chances of recognizing and responding to exclusionary and silencing practices. But further, Derrida’s great preoccupation with difference, with the otherness of the other, requires, as well, what Cornell refers to as “phenomenological symmetry.”⁵ Such an ethics of care grounded in phenomenological symmetry, in my view, is not very far removed from a communicative ethics framed by mutual respect and reciprocity.

Biesta’s concern around the violence perpetuated through one’s commitment to the most reasonable, consensus-driven norms is well taken. Yet to argue that a model of social interaction based upon agreement is mechanistic and not a human community pushes the issue. We need not feel compelled to have to choose between either identity or difference. Derrida, himself, says he maintains a “perpetual uneasiness” between his political work, which requires him to take positions, and his philosophical work, which demonstrates his commitment to ongoing questioning and critique. There is, in Derrida, a “condition of undecidability,” as Bernstein says. This condition is based upon the difference Derrida sees between the execution of a program employing a calculable — hence, risk free — logic and the edgy undecidability which accompanies acts born of ethico-political responsibility. Derrida himself puts it bluntly: “There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable.”⁶ Derrida comes very close, here, to a Sartrean, existentialist ethics marked by the burden each of us carries to choose ourselves. To the extent we see ourselves as ethically and politically engaged, we willingly contest the familiar at the same time that we act and take a

position. The fragility of this condition is not an excuse not to act. It is a reminder that certainty and closure leave us exceedingly open to the extension not eradication of suffering. Derrida suggests the need to maintain an abiding suspicion around our claims and actions. The trial we submit ourselves to, which is the condition of our uneasiness, always remains at the limits of what we know and what we are able to represent. An ethico-political project informed by Derrida would suggest there can be no other way.

Biesta also draws upon the work of Arendt and her notion of action to make his point that the basis of social interaction is not mutual understanding but difference. Action, it might be said, affirms our singularity and uniqueness as it nourishes political intercourse. But there is also the Arendt of *Between Past and Future* to consider. Here, she talks not about action as a singularly distinct mark in the public realm, but, drawing from Kant, about judgment as the ability to “think in the place of everybody else.’ The power of judgment,” she writes, “rests upon a potential agreement with others...an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement.”⁷ This capacity and willingness to take on multiple perspectives, she insists, is a way of situating and regarding oneself as a political being operating in the public realm. One needs to differentiate between what Benhabib calls the “agonistic” public space of *The Human Condition*, employed by Biesta to buttress his claim for an understanding of social interaction predicated upon difference, and the “associational space” I have just briefly sketched.⁸ While the agonistic space manages to preserve “the singularity of the subject,” it seems to leave no room for the difference of the other to emerge, or, more precisely, the other who exists at the margins or in exile. The risk taken on in such a public space is not predicated upon maintaining an openness toward the other, but rather, upon an alertness toward or awareness of the other as one who also acts; as such she or he is capable of acting upon others, and as Biesta readily acknowledges, will suffer from the consequences of another’s action. It would appear that without some recognition of the ethical relation of “I” toward the other, organized around that which evades being reconciled and avoids being appropriated into a representational scheme devised by those with relatively more power, social interaction would become distorted, if not severely threatened, and the relation of the center to the margins obfuscated. What Arendt and Derrida suggest is that the gap between identity and difference as the basis for social interaction can be narrowed if we can remain attentive to an ethico-political commitment to move across differences and, in the process, enlarge one’s capacity to honor and respect the otherness of the other.

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1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916, 1944), 209.
 2. Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 31-35.
 3. Israel Scheffler, *Conditions of Knowledge* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1965), 13.
 4. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.
 5. *Ibid.*, 55.
 6. Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 214-15.
 7. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Present* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1961), 220-21.
 8. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 93.