

Transcendence, Revelation, and the Constructivist Classroom: Or, In Praise of Teaching

Gert Biesta

University of Stirling

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE END OF TEACHING

If there is one idea that has significantly changed classroom practice in many countries around the world in recent decades, it has to be constructivism. For constructivism to have had such an impact it necessarily had to become theoretically multiple and open. Thus the constructivist classroom takes inspiration from a range of different, and to a certain extent even conflicting, theories and ideas, such as the radical constructivism of Ernst von Glasersfeld, the cognitive constructivism of Jean Piaget, the social constructivism of Lev Vygotsky, and the transactional constructivism of John Dewey. What unites these approaches — at least at a superficial level — and thus generally characterizes the constructivist classroom, is an emphasis on student activity. This is based on the assumption that students have to construct their own insights, understandings, and knowledge, and that teachers cannot do this for them. In the constructivist classroom, therefore, constructivism does not operate only as a learning theory or an epistemology, but also, first and foremost as a pedagogy. Virginia Richardson has correctly pointed out that “constructivism is a theory of learning and not a theory of teaching.”¹ This not only means that constructivist pedagogy is not simply the application of constructivist learning theory — Richardson goes even further by arguing that “the elements of effective constructivist teaching are not known”² — but also implies that a belief in constructivist learning theory does not necessarily require that one adopt a constructivist pedagogy. After all, as Richardson has put it, “students also make meaning from activities encountered in a transmission model of teaching.”³

The issue that interests me in this essay has to do with the impact of constructivist thinking on teaching. I use “teaching” here in a broad sense, as I am not only interested in the impact of constructivism on the practice of teaching, but also in its impact on the role of the teacher, the identity of the teacher, the justification of the teacher “position,” and even on the very idea of teaching and the very idea of the teacher. The thesis I wish to explore in this essay is whether it might be the case that the idea of “teaching” only has meaning if it carries with it a notion of “transcendence.” I do not wish to pursue this as a conceptual argument, which means that implied in the way in which I proceed is a notion of good teaching and of good education, more generally. (I cannot apologize for this, as I do not know of any other place to start from, although I am, of course, willing to provide my reasons.) My ambition with this essay is not only to explore the role of the idea of “transcendence” in thinking about teaching and education. I also intend to make some room for the idea of “transcendence” within the conversation of philosophy of education itself. In my view a certain notion of “transcendence” has been lurking behind the scenes of many recent discussions in our field. Most of this, however, has been couched in

secular language, particularly through references to “the other” and “the otherness of the other,” and also through more abstract notions such as “hospitality,” “the trace,” and “différance.” While the other does indeed transcend the self, there is perhaps more to the idea of “transcendence” than meets the eye, and it is this “excess” that interests me here, both in relation to the idea of teaching and in relation to the idea of philosophy of education.

I am aware that this exploration takes me in a direction that some may find difficult to give a place within the conversation of philosophy of education, as it implies engagement with religious language and theological argument. Some of this difficulty stems from the way in which the realm of meaning and rationality has been circumscribed in the Western world from the Enlightenment onward — and, in a certain way, already well before the advance of the Enlightenment.⁴ In this configuration religion has generally ended up as the other of meaning, the other of rationality, and even the other of reason, resulting in a dualistic way of thinking that still exerts a powerful influence in our times. I do not wish to dismiss the reasons that have led to the construction of this set up, not least because much that has happened in the name of religion is indeed deeply problematic. But that does not mean that *everything* that has happened in the name of religion is automatically bad, just as not *everything* that has happened in the name of such notions as “democracy” or “humanity” is automatically and unequivocally good. My ambition with this essay — an ambition that, within the limited space available, I will not be able to fulfill at the level of argument, but hope to be able to “indicate” at the level of how the argument is “performed” — is, in a sense, to transcend the particular way in which the realm of meaning and reason has been carved up, so that engagement with religious language and theological argument is no longer a matter of jumping over the fence of reason, but is part of overcoming, and perhaps even refusing, the very way in which this fence has been constructed in the first place.

The occasion for my reflections is, however, neither philosophical nor theological, but has to do with a very concrete and practical issue, which is the status of teaching and the teacher in the constructivist classroom. To this I now turn.

CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY, IMMANENCE, AND THE LEARNING PARADOX

Although, as mentioned, constructivism is first of all a theory of learning, the uptake of this theory in schools, colleges, and universities has led to a change in practice that is often characterized as a shift from teaching to learning. Robert Barr and John Tagg have even made the stronger claim that what is at stake is a Kuhnian paradigm shift from what they refer to as the “Instruction Paradigm” to the “Learning Paradigm.”⁵ The point of using these phrases is not that under the instruction paradigm there is no interest in student learning whereas under the learning paradigm there is. The point for Barr and Tagg — and for the many others who have followed in their footsteps so as to create a present-day “common sense” about education — is that in the instruction paradigm the focus is on the transmission of content from the teacher to the student, whereas in the learning paradigm the focus is on the ways in which teachers can support and facilitate student learning. This is in line with Richardson’s description of constructivist pedagogy as involving

the creation of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, with goals that focus on individual students developing deep understandings in the subject matter of interest and habits of mind that aid in future learning.⁶

The shift from teaching to learning has radically changed common perceptions of what teaching entails and of what a teacher is. Constructivist thinking has, on the one hand, promoted the idea of teaching as the creation of learning environments and as facilitating, supporting, or scaffolding student learning. On the other hand, it has, in one and the same move, discredited the “transmission model of teaching” and thus has given lecturing and so-called “didactic teaching” a really bad name. Constructivism seems, in other words, to have given up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and that students have something to learn from their teachers. If I see it correctly, this has even led to a certain embarrassment among teachers about the very idea of teaching and about their identity as a teacher. This is, perhaps, what concerns me most, because when we give up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and make them into facilitators of learning, we do, in a sense, give up on the very idea of education.⁷ So what is happening here and what is to be done?

The reason why teaching — or a certain conception of teaching that is not about the facilitation of learning — seems to have dropped out of the equation has to do with the fact that constructivism sees the process of learning as entirely immanent. Although this already creates problems for constructivism as a theory of learning, it becomes even more of a problem when constructivism gets translated into a pedagogy and becomes part of a theory of education, as one could argue that the very point of education is precisely *not* to repeat what is already there but to bring something new to the scene. This is, of course, an old discussion in the educational literature, one that goes straight back to Plato’s *Meno*, to Socrates, and to the learning paradox⁸ — and many authors do indeed conceive of Socrates and Plato as “the first constructivists in education” or, to be more precise, as the first ones enacting a constructivist *pedagogy*.⁹ Socrates’s way out of the learning paradox is to argue that all learning is a matter of recollection. This is why he can deny that he has anything to teach and is involved in teaching. It is also why he represents his educational efforts as entirely maieutic: bringing out what is already there.

It is not too difficult to see the connection with constructivism, not only in terms of the theory of learning but also with regard to the vanishing role of the teacher. But whereas Socrates *says* that he is not involved in any teaching and, by doing so even wishes to deny the very possibility of teaching, this is not consistent with what he actually *does*. Sharon Todd, in her book *Learning from the Other*, argues that Socrates “cannot simply be taken at his word,” and shows, through a subtle reading of the *Meno*, that there is actually quite a lot of teaching going on in the way in which Socrates tries to convince Meno’s slave boy that he already possesses the knowledge he did not realize he possessed.¹⁰ Todd particularly highlights the teaching performed by Socrates that has an impact on the slave boy’s subjectivity, a process through which the slave boy is being taught that he is indeed a slave boy, and also the process through which the slave boy is being taught that he is a learner, that is, a “subject of pedagogy” (*LO*, 24). Todd thus presents Socrates as “the teacher, who,

like the perfect murderer, makes it appear that teaching has not taken place, who leaves the scene without a trace, and who, moreover, is convinced of his own innocence" (*LO*, 24). Yet by proclaiming his questions to be innocent Socrates actually "obscures the fundamental structures of alteration and asymmetry that are present between teacher and student" (*LO*, 25).

Todd's analysis provides support for the thesis that the idea of teaching only has meaning if it carries with it a notion of "transcendence." Her argument also shows that the shift from teaching to learning is, in a sense, ideological in that it hides the teaching that goes on under the name of Socratic questioning. To articulate the transcendent dimension of teaching, Todd turns to Emmanuel Levinas who indeed makes the claim that "teaching is not reducible to maieutics [but] comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain."¹¹ Todd explains that the view of teaching as bringing more than I contain "is antithetical to the Socratic method that so predominates dialogical approaches to educational practice, where teaching is viewed as 'bringing out of the I that which it already contains'" (*LO*, 30). This is why she concludes that "the maieutic model erases the significance of the Other and claims that learning is a recovery contained within the I, rather than a disruption of the I provoked by the Other in a moment of sociality" (*LO*, 30).¹²

Todd's argument makes a crucial contribution to understanding the role of transcendence in teaching. Yet there are two aspects that, in my view, need expansion. One is relatively minor. Todd focuses her argument on the idea of "learning to become" — a notion inspired by Sigmund Freud and Cornelius Castoriadis. While becoming may be part of what happens as a result of learning, I do not think that it is the only thing that matters in education — and to a certain extent I would even want to question the idea that we need to learn in order to become. This is why I disagree with Castoriadis's statement, as quoted by Todd, in which he argues that "the point of pedagogy is not to teach particular things, but to develop in the subject the capacity to learn" (*LO*, 19). I would like to place a stronger emphasis on the "act" of teaching and take a broader view of what the purposes of teaching can be, which for me would include the teaching of "particular things."¹³

The more important issue, however, has to do with the way in which the notion of "transcendence" figures in the discussion — and my point here is not to criticize Todd but to bring attention to the particular use of this notion and then suggest that we take this a step further. What is interesting about Todd's discussion is that, with Levinas, she does indeed explicitly engage with the idea of "transcendence." Yet this transcendence is always brought back to — or perhaps we could say contained within — the idea of the Other understood as "a specific, embodied individual" (*LO*, 147n1). While Todd emphasizes that what Levinas means by the Other is not simply "a sociological 'Other' who is marginalized or maligned" or "another person who, as a subject, resembles myself," and while she quotes Levinas in saying that "the Other is what I myself am not," the Other that transcends the self, either as teacher or as another from whom we can learn to become, only seems to figure in the discussion as a *human* other. (*LO*, 29) The issue I raise here is not whether this, in itself, poses a problem — one could even argue that this is precisely what is

distinctive about Levinas's notion of transcendence. The issue, rather, is whether, as soon as we say that the Other is what I myself am not, it is possible to contain this otherness to other human beings, or whether we should be open to the possibility that something more radically different might break through. The question, therefore, is how we might think transcendence, which, as I suggest, also raises the question as to how we might transcend thinking — particularly thinking of what “is” transcendent.

THINKING TRANSCENDENCE, TRANSCENDING THINKING

My guide in extending the idea of transcendence a little is a recent book by Merold Westphal called *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*.¹⁴ In the book Westphal brings the ideas of these two thinkers “in conversation” precisely around the theme of transcendence. One of the central claims of the book is that both for Levinas and for Søren Kierkegaard transcendence involves more than only the otherness of other human beings. Yet while Levinas and Kierkegaard agree “that the transcendence and alterity that deserve to be called divine are not to be found in the realm of theoretical knowledge [but] occur in the decentering of the cognitive self by a command that comes from on high,” they disagree “in that Levinas insists that the neighbor is always the middle term between me and God, while Kierkegaard insists that it is God who is always the middle term between me and my neighbor” (*LKD*, 5).

In the first two chapters of his book Westphal discusses this through the notion of “revelation.” What is interesting is that Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, explores the idea of revelation through a discussion of the Meno, focusing on the question of whether it is possible to think of teaching outside of, and different from, the idea of maieutics. Whereas the maieutic conception of teaching sees teaching as *accidental* to learning, Climacus asks, “what would have to be true *if* there were to be an alternative to Socrates's account of knowledge as recollection, *if* the teacher were really to teach so that the relation to the teacher would be essential rather than accidental” (*LKD*, 25). The answer he gives is that the teacher not only needs to give the learner the truth but also needs to give the learner “the condition of recognizing it as truth,” because “if the learner were himself the condition for understanding the truth, then he merely needs to recollect” (*LKD*, 25). This “double truth giving” is what Climacus characterizes as *revelation*. Revelation therefore means not merely “that the teacher presents the learner with some knowledge not already possessed, but more importantly, also [with] the condition for recognizing it as truth,” as it is only in the latter case that “the relation to the teacher becomes *essential*” (*LKD*, 25, emphasis added).

Climacus helps us see that a notion of teaching that is essential rather than accidental to learning is not simply about presenting students with something they do not yet know. Rather, it is about presenting students with something that “is neither derivable from nor validated by what [they] already know,” but that truly transcends what they already know (*LKD*, 26). As Westphal explains, “For both Kierkegaard and Levinas the knowledge that deserves to be called revelation is independent of the ‘already saids’ that are the condition for our recognition of the

truth as such” (*LKD*, 26). This is why Levinas writes that Socratic teaching is characterized by the “primacy of the same,” that is, “to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside.”¹⁵ In contrast to this, Levinas is after a relationship in which I receive from the Other “beyond the capacity of the I” — which not only means “to have an idea of infinity” but also means “to be taught.”¹⁶ And it is this teaching that can be called revelation.¹⁷

Westphal notes that both Levinas and Kierkegaard link the notion of revelation to that of *authority*. After all, if teaching is about presenting students with something that is “neither derivable from nor validated by” what they already know, then they have to take it on the authority of the teacher. The wider significance of this insight lies in the fact that, as Westphal puts it, “for both Levinas and Kierkegaard the basis of the ethical and religious life lies in an authoritative revelation that in its immediacy comes to us from beyond our own powers of recollection” (*LKD*, 26). In the 1965 essay “Phenomenon and Enigma,”¹⁸ Levinas refers to this revelation as “enigma” in order to highlight that what is revealed is not a phenomenon, not something that is comprehensible and comprehended by me, but rather something that is “beyond” my cognition and comprehension — and therefore even “beyond being” and “beyond reason.”¹⁹ Enigma is about a way of “manifesting oneself without manifesting oneself.” It stands for that which “signifies itself without revealing itself.”²⁰ It is about God who literally “comes to mind”²¹ rather than a mind trying to comprehend God.

Westphal shows that with the idea of “enigma” Levinas is both arguing against a “logocentric reason” that “arbitrarily excludes God from its world” and thus is “dogmatically atheistic” and a logocentric reason that “domesticates God by transforming the divine into a (visible or intelligible) phenomenon” — a process in which, as Levinas puts it, “the divinity of God dissipates” (*LKD*, 31). The latter point explains why Levinas’s emphasis on the Other — on what, previously, I have referred to as the *human* Other — does not exclude the possibility of “further” or “other” transcendence, so to speak. What Levinas wants to prevent is the situation in which (knowledge of) God gets in the way of my hearing the Other — which, unlike Kierkegaard, he sees as a bigger problem than the option where the Other would get in the way of my seeing God (*LKD*, 53). This is what Westphal refers to with the idea of the ethical as “the teleological suspension of the religious” (*LKD*, 47). Suspension is not to be understood as a reduction of the religious to the ethical, but as a negation of its claim to autonomy and self-sufficiency. “Teleological suspension does not eliminate; it relativizes” (*LKD*, 47).

TRANSCENDING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

If the previous section suffices as an indication of what it might mean to “think” transcendence — which, as I have tried to argue, also means to transcend thinking because transcendence is precisely *not* about comprehension — and if it also suffices as an indication of how transcendence may connect to the idea of teaching, then, in a final step, we should also ask whether any of this has or should have implications for philosophy of education. Westphal provides a strong argument, based on his

reading of Levinas's essay "God and Philosophy,"²² as to why transcendence matters for *philosophy*. Central to the argument is Levinas's critique of the idea that philosophy "has a monopoly on meaning and intelligibility" (*LKD*, 59). To make this point Levinas stages a distinction between the God of the Bible — whom he positions as a God who transcends philosophical thought — and the God of the philosophers. While philosophy (for example, in the form of what Levinas calls "rational theology") tries to capture the meaning of God by pulling him into the domain of being — thus denying and even destroying the very possibility of transcendence²³ — Levinas tries to keep a place for a meaning "beyond being."²⁴ This does *not* require that philosophy bring the idea of transcendence within its thought — because doing that would pull transcendence back into a confined domain of meaning as being — but rather requires that philosophy is transcended, that it is interrupted, that its fundamental incompleteness is exposed. Philosophy might try to open itself up to such an interruption, although there cannot be any guarantee of success because an interruption that really interrupts always arrives unexpectedly, as a thief in the night. Philosophy might, of course, also deny the need for transcendence and shield itself from any possible interruption, thus trying to maintain its self-chosen self-sufficiency. While philosophy might perhaps be forgiven for such a strategy, the upshot of the argument that I have tried to develop in this essay is that this is not a viable option for philosophy of *education* — if, that is, philosophy of education does not wish to collapse into a philosophy of learning in which teaching has lost its meaning.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay has been motivated by a very concrete and practical concern about the disappearance of teaching and the demise of the role of the teacher as someone who has something to say and something to bring. This, as I have shown, is not merely a theoretical or philosophical discussion but is having a real impact on common perceptions about teaching and even on the self-perception of teachers. In response to this issue I have argued that if teaching is to be more than just the facilitation of learning or the creation of learning environments, it needs to carry with it a certain notion of transcendence. I have not only tried to make clear what "kind" of transcendence is needed; I have also tried to indicate what it means to think transcendence consistently, which, as I have suggested, is not merely a matter of thought or comprehension but also of taking the idea and possibility of revelation seriously. In doing this I have also tried to suggest that transcendence cannot be confined to the Other as another human being. As soon as one brings transcendence in, one has to take it seriously all the way down — or, perhaps we should say: all the way up. I have only been able to hint at what this might entail because I do not want to present my line of reasoning as a simple shift from philosophy to theology and religion but rather as an attempt to challenge a taken-for-granted configuration of the field. While philosophy in general may try to resist this intervention, I have suggested that this is not an option for a philosophy that takes education seriously. What I offer for discussion, therefore, is not only the suggestion that there can be no teaching without a notion of transcendence but also that there can be no philosophy of education without an idea of transcendence.

1. Virginia Richardson, "Constructivist Pedagogy," *Teachers College Record* 105, no. 9 (2003): 1629.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 1628.
4. See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 55–83.
5. Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change* 27, no. 6 (1995): 13–25.
6. Richardson, "Constructivist Pedagogy," 1627.
7. This is one of the main points made in Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2006).
8. The learning paradox is the predicament posed by Meno as to how one can go looking for something when one does not know what one is looking for, and how can one recognize what one is looking for if one does not know it.
9. Robert Nola and Gürol Irzik, eds., *Philosophy, Science, Education and Culture* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 105. Nola and Irzik do note that while Plato and Socrates can be seen as the first enacting a constructivist pedagogy, they do not hold a constructivist theory of knowledge.
10. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2003), 23. This work will be cited in the text as *LO* for all subsequent references.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.
12. A similar approach can be found in Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, which introduces the idea of a "pedagogy of interruption."
13. See also Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm, 2010).
14. Merold Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). This work will be cited in the text as *LKD* for all subsequent references.
15. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.
16. Ibid., 51.
17. See *ibid.*, 67.
18. Emmanuel Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 61–74.
19. Ibid., 61 and 62.
20. Ibid., 73.
21. Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).
22. Ibid., 55–78.
23. Ibid., 56.
24. Ibid., 57.