

“As If We Were Called”: Responding to (Pedagogical) Responsibility

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Martin Buber’s thinking has contributed significantly to the realization that the self can and should be understood in relational terms. In the idiom of his best known work, *I and Thou*, the self comes into being as “I saying Thou,” by addressing, by responding directly to, Being/Other.¹ This direct address is differentiated from “I grasping It,” an instrumental relation that can never be fully responsible. As Buber puts it, “Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding.”² Emmanuel Levinas accepts Buber’s central insight but extends it significantly to insist that both responding and responsibility are prior to the very possibility of instrumental thinking and action.³ For Levinas, responsibility, the *necessary* response to the face of the Other, precedes consciousness and intentionality, precedes knowing and understanding.

In this essay, I take a small step toward taking Buber and Levinas seriously in matters educational. This does not mean explicating their views. Nor am I “applying” their views to school settings because, on their terms, application is an instrumental move that is necessarily preceded by response. Nonetheless, it is possible to respond to the project of teaching and learning as if it were radically relational and as if responsibility comes first, that is, in a spirit of recognition and acceptance *before* explanation and control. In this spirit I set forth here my response to another as teacher. I offer this in recognition that she too is responding and that her response is the ground of her being a teacher and her being able to understand and explain who she is and what she is doing as teacher. In the process, I hope to illustrate what it might mean to teach, in Levinas’s words, “as if we were called.”⁴

Initially, I describe this young female teacher, Kate, three months into her first teaching position. My descriptive snapshot (composed with Kate’s assistance) suggests failure, failure to control the class or to develop in her students an appreciation of high academic standards.⁵ My second descriptive snapshot composed less than a year later captures Kate in a different position. Her students are hard at work, cooperative and interested in matters of historical and moral import.

What are we to make of this shift? The simple explanation — several months more experience — is only one factor in a complex understanding related to the nature of agency, the centrality of relations and the structure of response. Both Kate’s “failure” in the first instance and her subsequent “success” can be read in terms of relation and response. That is the story I tell.

Acknowledging radical responsibility to the other by recognizing relation as constitutive of the knower dramatically alters conceptions of teacher development, teacher knowledge and effective teaching. Such a view/response requires that knowing (students, subject matter, pedagogical theory) be understood within a framework of “infinitely growing answerability,”⁶ or what I have elsewhere called

“pedagogical response-ability.”⁷ The teacher *is* her response-ability, construed not primarily as the conscious action of a willful agent but first of all as a life stance that incorporates “real responding.”

Let me make clear that I am not talking about teaching as a vocation or “calling” in the way that David Hansen, for example, describes in *The Call to Teach*.⁸ Kate does think about teaching in this way, as many of the statements she made to me in both formal interviews and informal discussion attest. Still, my point applies whether a vocational view of teaching is in play or not. If there is an apt analog in contemporary discourse for the point I am making here, it is more accurately captured in the African-American communication strategy of call-and-response as a way of being-with-others. Geneva Smitherman defines call-and-response as “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener.”⁹ If we change “speaker” and “listener” in the previous statement to “Other” (where “Other” can be person or placeholder for relational environment) and “agent,” we begin to get a sense of the relational and conditioned quality of human action. Call-and-response in all its iterations — in preaching, in music, in drama — is physical as well as verbal, is improvisational and emotive, is either spontaneous or elicited, and is typically affirmative. So too is teaching in response.

My central claim here is really a point about the structure of pedagogical action and the nature of any teacher’s agency. Action is not individual but relational. The unit of analysis is the relation, grounded always in Buber’s “I saying Thou,” though extended for acknowledged instrumental purposes within the horizon of relation to “I grasping it.” Agency is conditioned by environment and linked functionally to relations actually conceivable for that actor in that environment.

This is also a point, as Levinas insists, about the nature of the moral, and for me, about the nature of education as a moral project. Ethics becomes first philosophy, giving rise to the possibilities of being or of knowing in pedagogical contexts. Controlling moral theories, deontological and teleological, are inadequate to illuminate a theory of pedagogical action as relational and conditioned. A theory grounded in the metaphor of response is called for, called forth. Kate (unknowingly) prompted me to reconsider, to recreate, my understanding of the project of teaching and learning. My response constitutes a call to replace an individualistic, instrumental view of teaching and learning with a relational, response-based one.

A TALE OF TWO KATES?

When Kate took her first job in January of 2000 at one of the most prestigious school districts in the state, everyone (including Kate herself) expected her to develop into a marvelous teacher. When I observed her in late March as part of an inquiry related to the development of teacher knowledge, she was almost unrecognizable, her spirit broken. I could detect no positive relationships with students; her connections to colleagues seemed tenuous. The lesson I observed in several iterations, one that asked high school students to “diagnose” personality disorders, seemed ill-conceived and ill-advised. I was stunned.

Kate changed jobs at the end of the school year and invited me to her new school in February of the next year to observe again. I was stunned — but for the opposite reason. She was back. The smart, confident, caring, provocative, self-described “flamboyant” person I had known was present in that classroom. I do not mean to suggest that she had suddenly matured into a master teacher. But she *was* recognizably the person I had known, and *that* young woman clearly demonstrated enormous talent for teaching. Her lesson was not flawless, but it *was* academically substantive, intellectually challenging and morally rich.

The story I tell here highlights two pedagogical facets of this seemingly bifurcated experience: 1) the circumstances under which she began each of two positions and 2) the subject matter she was teaching in each case.

WHO’S CALLING?

Kate got the call from the high school principal in a suburban district widely known for paying its teachers high salaries. A full-time social studies position was open immediately. Kate would be teaching an all-senior, elective psychology schedule of five classes a day. She took what she thought would be a great job.

There was more to the story, more than Kate in her inexperience thought to ask about. It all became painfully clear as she began her work. Kate’s senior students had run through (and run out) five teachers already that year. The most recent was a man well-liked by the students (because he required little of them), but unappreciated by the principal (because he required little of them!). That teacher was let go to bring in Kate, newly certified but armed with high standards and dedication.

These second semester seniors, by and large children of privilege in this upper middle class suburb, were unimpressed with high standards and dedication, at least in this elective course. They had worked out a routine marked by high grades and little learning and they were not about to respond positively to a teacher who planned to disrupt their ease. And disrupt it she did. On a mandate from the principal to hold the line academically, Kate began to assign significant student work and to conduct challenging assessments. The students rebelled. They whined and wheedled and complained and called in reinforcements, their parents. Some parents complained to Kate, others to the principal, about low grades and unfair treatment.

Kate was confronted with a contradiction. Amid much talk of “high academic standards,” parents, teachers and administrators were colluding in a deal that was more about high grades, high pay and high profile. Teachers were well-paid and parents wanted their money’s worth. That translated into achievement for their typically self-absorbed and generally talented teenagers. While Kate’s colleagues had figured out over time how to marry the achievement the parents wanted with the profile the principal wanted with the ever-tenuous self-understanding of the teenage student, Kate was unprepared.

As things went sour, Kate isolated herself from her new colleagues. Her mentor was outwardly supportive but neither willing nor able to tackle the real difficulties. Kate’s principal did seem to understand the position in which he had placed her but he kept his distance.

The result was predictable. Kate was a threat, not an ally. She held to her belief, putatively backed by the administration, that learning should precede achievement. The seniors, in their last semester, saw no point in playing along with her. Maybe they never gave her a chance because she replaced a teacher they wanted to keep. At 26 and in her first position, Kate's professional self-understanding limited her horizon of response. Despite good will, hard work, and seemingly adequate preparation, she could neither read nor transform the relational pattern she inherited into one more responsive and responsible. Her response didn't "fit."

The rebellion was not open, but it was obvious. The classroom environment could best be described as brittle. Laughter had a mean tone. Participation in class activities came grudgingly. Male students engaged in under-the-breath muttering of offensive comments, usually directed at female students.

Kate finished the school year and determined that she would move on. She quickly secured another position, this time teaching ninth grade American history. Her new district was much like the previous one — suburban, predominantly white, relatively wealthy, and both proud and protective of its academic reputation. The assistant principal, a woman, mentioned to me that the district thought themselves fortunate to attract a teacher of her academic background; she also noted, ironically I think, that they were lucky to attract a teacher who had "cut her teeth" in Kate's prior district.

Kate greeted a new school year, new colleagues, and new students with a clean slate. Her students, ninth graders, were themselves new to the high school environment and treated Kate with respect for authority. They responded to Kate's academic demands with few questions and only the occasional good-natured complaint of "having too much to do." The students' respect for Kate prompted respect in return. They responded personally to Kate's expressions of support and caring. Quickly, the classroom became a positive and productive place where young men and women worked and laughed and asked questions and demanded answers and where Kate did the same. Their work prompted no concern and little response from parents or administrators. Grades were awarded and generally accepted as an accurate reflection of achievement.

Kate quickly established herself as a valued and valuable member of the staff. She impressed colleagues with her academic credentials, her past experience (!), her knowledge of subject matter, her good will, and the respect and consideration with which she moved in and out of classrooms as an itinerant teacher. Kate was growing more comfortable and confident everyday as a teacher. Her students were learning American history; she was their ally in that common task.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

When Kate was hired to teach psychology to mostly college-bound high school seniors, she was told that this year-long course was intended to be the equivalent of a one-semester Introduction to Psychology course at the college level. Kate admits to wondering whether she was the best candidate for the position. Her academic background included a history concentration within a comprehensive social studies certification program and a masters degree in political science. Still, Kate was not

too worried. A self-described lifelong learner with a rich understanding of social sciences generally, she assumed she could both stay ahead of and learn with her students. This example challenges that assumption.

The topic was personality disorders. This lesson, part of a unit exploring personality as a psychological concept, began with a “boggle exercise” as a warm-up. The word of the day was “diagnosis” and students were asked to find as many dictionary words in this topical term as they could. Then Kate gave students a narrative describing a party at which various persons with personality disorders were in attendance. They were asked to diagnose which partygoers demonstrated which personality disorders. Kate’s students struggled; questions were constant. Kate attempted to answer the questions but seemed unsure of the difference between most disorders herself. After students worked for about ten minutes, Kate called them to order and called on specific students to identify characters’ disorders. Several students provided “correct” answers and Kate responded with constructive, probing questions about their reasons for identifying each disorder with the given character — until a book was dropped and classroom order broke down. At that point, Kate grouped the students in dyads asking them to imagine and describe their own party with four or five characters who evidence identifiable disorders. Within minutes, several pairs of male students come forward with a finished product asking “Is this OK?”

On its surface, this might be viewed as a well-designed lesson. There is a clear topic, personality disorders, and the focus is the ability to diagnose personality disorders. Kate provided a warm up, put students to work in a substantive activity in which they ostensibly learned to “see” each defined disorder in the behavior of the partygoers, responded to what they were thinking in a respectful and probing manner, and then turned the task around and asked them to describe the behavior they would expect of a person who has been diagnosed with a given disorder.

But this lesson was not a fitting response for two reasons, one linked to conception and the other to implementation. The first problem is that Kate didn’t understand personality or its disorders well enough to recognize the minefield she was entering. To suggest that one can diagnose a personality disorder based on party behavior undercuts the difficulty of diagnosis, demeans the dignity of those who are diagnosed, and reifies the various personality disorders in a way that no psychiatrist or psychotherapist would support. Kate would not knowingly do any of this. She told me that her mentor suggested the party activity when Kate indicated that she was not sure how to approach this admittedly challenging topic.

The second problem, the problem of implementation, arises from Kate’s inability to connect students to the substance of the lesson. While a few students, mostly female, took the in-class assignment seriously and seemed quite interested, many seemed to take their cue from the party setting for the activity. Or perhaps their own discomfort with the idea of personality disorders prompted defensive responses. In any case, Kate’s relationships with members of her classes were not sturdy enough to support a careful consideration of a difficult topic. She did not know them, nor they her.

Kate's action is explicable and predictable, even defensible. She recognized her lack of expertise and understanding, sought guidance from the materials and mentor available to her, and planned a lesson many would describe as technically proficient. She responded to her task in keeping with her pedagogical principal of "active learning." At a conscious level, she acted responsibly.

But it is important to render visible here Kate's first response, the one that grounded her conscious understanding and action. Kate took into her position an understanding of herself as teacher, one that fit nicely with the principal's mandate that she hold the line academically. *That* was the response, the relational horizon, that limited her choices. She responded to the principal and attended to the advice of her mentor, but she never even heard the call of her students. She did not respond to her students as persons for whom personality and its disorders prompt both fascination and fear. And so, she could not encourage her students' response-ability toward those, including perhaps some of their classmates, who suffer from or live with others who suffer from mental illness.

Ten months later, Kate was teaching American history as if she had been doing it for years. Kate's understanding of American history is both broad and deep, grounded in undergraduate and graduate study. Moreover, her understanding is rich, shaped by serious and on-going consideration, both intellectual and existential, of current events and past patterns. She is well aware of the conceptual and moral nuances of American history; even when faced with events or periods about which she is less knowledgeable, she knows what she does not know, knows what questions to ask about that.

On the day I observed her, she was wrapping up a unit on World War II with the third in a series of lessons on the Holocaust, a topic she has explored in depth both academically and personally. One of Kate's undergraduate professors is a Holocaust expert and her undergraduate university annually sponsors a Holocaust conference, attracting international experts in the field. Kate herself is the daughter of a Jewish father and a Christian minister mother and has visited a concentration camp. The lesson I observed was existentially challenging, morally sensitive, politically relevant and academically accurate.

The central question around which the lesson was constructed was "Can the Holocaust happen again?" Kate asked students by show of hands to answer the question initially and tells them that this question is the focus of their time together. She then took a detour, asking students whether they knew the difference between genocide and ethnic cleansing. A few students responded and Kate commented or asked follow-up questions, occasionally writing a word or phrase or example on the board. More students participated, often citing examples from current events articles they read as part of an on-going class assignment, until at least half the class had contributed. By the end, Kate had a working definition with examples (Albania, Cambodia, East Timor, Rwanda) on the board in front of them.

Then she returned to the Holocaust and the possibility of recurrence. Four students tried to justify their competing positions and Kate redirected their comments so that they were talking with each other. After the competing views were

fairly well-developed, Kate asked students if they could think of Holocaust-like events occurring today. In a flash, students cited their examples of genocide and ethnic cleansing and one could almost see the light bulbs going on. The conversation about why and how such events could occur was wide-ranging, acknowledging political realities, religious beliefs, historical patterns and human nature.

Near the end of the lesson, Kate distributed the Martin Niemoller quote that ends: “Then they came for me — and there was no one there to object.” She asked the students to read the quote/poem and take a moment to think about it. The room was quiet. Kate said, “When I read through the Internet activity you did the other day...in the part where I said what else do you what to know about...at least half of you wrote: ‘I don’t understand why this happened, how people can do this to each other’...I don’t have a good answer to that. What do you think?” Students offered four theories: fear, being in the minority, allowing folks to walk all over you, and silence being approval. Kate accepted their responses and developed them with further comment.

She wrapped up by saying, “Let’s bring this down to a localized level,” and asked students to think about what they do — laughing at a racist joke, tolerating bullying — that encourages intolerance, the kind of intolerance that makes Holocaust-like events imaginable. Kate encouraged several students to comment, leaving the last word to them.

Kate needed no help — from mentor or textbook — to develop this lesson. It arose (by Kate’s report, almost effortlessly) from rich understanding, deeply held values, contemporary world events, and concern for her ninth-graders. Pedagogical principles and strategies did not shape this lesson; they were revealed through it. As was the case with the first lesson I described, the grounding response(s) that made Kate’s actions possible occurred long prior to any plan for this particular lesson. The call in this context was one she recognized; who she is enabled her to respond in a rich and fitting way.

“AS IF WE WERE CALLED”: RESPONSE-ABLE TEACHING AND LEARNING

If Kate’s story is an object lesson, what does it teach us? That Kate’s initial “failure” and subsequent “success” are integrally linked to the circumstances in which they occurred? Yes. That her actions are best understood not as self-initiated goal-oriented plans but as complicated if explicable responses to specific persons and prompts? Yes, but there is still more, I think. Kate’s actions as a teacher — her immediate, identifiable responses — are conditioned not only by the relational context in which she acts but also, and even more profoundly, by those prior responses that shape her being in the world and her understanding of that world and herself.

In the first instance, Kate heard one call — the principal’s call for academic rigor. That call fit with her sense of her self and how she understood her role as teacher. She responded to that call but never heard the call of her students. She never really engaged or responded to them at all; they were simply players stumbling badly through a script Kate had already written. And therein lay her failure. Kate struggles still with whose fault it was. She believes, as do I, that the principal could and should

have seen this coming and shaped the situation in a way that would have made success more likely for her. She believes, as do I, that senior students should be more self-motivated and more mature. She believes, as do I, that the culture of the community made it unlikely that anyone taking this particular position would find real success. She believes, as do I, that it made little sense for the principal to hire a psychology teacher who knew no psychology. What Kate still does not understand, however, is that she might have heard a different call and responded more constructively to a challenging situation. Her construction of herself as teacher, grounded in prior experiences of relation and response, limited her response-ability.

As a teacher, Kate is neither as bad as she appeared in April, nor as good as she seemed in February. In a situation that called for knowledge she did not have, she struggled. In a situation that tapped her past experience and her basic values, she shone with a light that inspired her students. In a setting that offered her respect, she responded in kind. In a setting that denied her respect, she withdrew. But it is more complicated than that. How would her first experience have been different had the principal initially asked her to care for these students because they had experience a tough first semester? How would it have been different were she teaching Advanced Placement American History rather than elective psychology? How would her second experience been different had Kate started in the middle of the year? How would she fare teaching ninth-grade history in a high pay, high pressure district?

Kate's story reminds us that teachers are not good or bad, knowledgeable or not, skilled or unskilled. Rather, they are more or less response-able, enabled to respond in a fitting way to another in context. Thus "qualified" is not an attribute of an individual, but a relational descriptor, linked to colleagues, students, site, curricular demands. It is dependent, in the first place, on the quality of one's response to the Other. Thus teacher preparation and development becomes grounded in the possibilities of recognizing the Other, reading the pedagogical situation, and responding to all things considered. It stems from the root realization that one's (past and present) response to the Other is constitutive of one's self.

What does it mean then to teach "as if we were called?" This much is surely clear. "As if we were called" is not an exhortation to do good. Rather, it is the unflinching recognition that human action, pedagogical action, occurs always as response to a call or prompt; it is interaction, always conditioned in ways that we often do not consciously recognize and that are never fully under our control. This recognition is a humbling one, calling us back to the root of responsibility, the recognition of the Other.

Kate has moved on, apparently successful now and settled in an educational location where her ability to respond matches the call put to her. I, on the other hand, am unsettled. Levinas suggests that a human life is a project of "infinitely growing answerability." I wonder if Kate's success in her new position will obscure the memory of her first humbling experience. Her present success allows her to view her prior, uncomfortable experience as an anomaly, and to retain confidence that she now has things "under control." I wonder, though, if her initial experience were not

the more valuable one. I worry that her new-found comfort may halt the growth of “answerability.”

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1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958).
 2. Martin Buber, *The Way of Response*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 20.
 3. See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
 4. Emmanuel Levinas, “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), 70.
 5. “Kate” is a pseudonym for a practicing teacher who has contributed to this effort by allowing me to observe her teaching, by talking with me both informally and in formal interview formats, and by reviewing and responding to my narrative construction of her work. I am grateful for her willingness to work and think with me.
 6. Sean Hand, “Introduction to ‘Substitution,’” in *The Levinas Reader*, 88.
 7. Barbara S. Stengel, “Teaching in Response,” in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: The Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 349-57.
 8. David Hansen, *The Call to Teach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).
 9. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 104.