

Revisiting Deconstructive Pedagogy: Testifying to Iterability, “At Once, *Aussi Sec*”

Harvey Shapiro
Northeastern University

In this essay, I will suggest what is educationally at stake in Jacques Derrida’s “quasiconcept” of iterability. In doing so, I will examine how proponents of deconstructive pedagogy have interpreted, used, or underused this term and will argue for alternative understandings of its import for educational theory and practice.¹ I will use Gert Biesta’s important work as a starting point. One of the more prolific scholars of Derrida’s deconstructive educational thought, Biesta, as much as anyone, helpfully continues to provoke and challenge educators and theorists to think of teaching and learning in a less calculating, less transmissive spirit, making room for the alterity of student invention.² Yet I wish to show how, in light of iterability, certain aspects of his interpretations of Derrida merit further consideration.

As we will recall, iterability is made possible by the “differential-deferring [*differantielle*] structure of intentionality,” (*LI*, 58) the “structurally divided or ‘differing-deferring’ [*differante*]” (*LI*, 70) quality of a mark, sign, or utterance. So because of the mark’s dual quality of being comprised of “identity *and* difference,” it has the possibility of “repetition *and* alteration” (*LI*, 71). A mark is iterable because it is divided, deferred, differed “in the moment of its inscription” (*LI*, 9). Iterability, then, is the mark’s differing and deferring in motion — alive, evoking response. In a succinct articulation of its relationship to his more well-traveled term, *différance*, Derrida explains that iterability is “the logic that ties repetition to alterity” (*LI*, 62).

With these articulations of iterability in mind, I here consider three of Biesta’s recurring claims. The first is that a pedagogy of deconstruction implies what I would call a student’s radical hermeneutic autonomy and therefore that the meaning of a text or lesson lies exclusively with the student’s reception as interpreter.³ The second claim implicit in Biesta’s writing is that recognizing the inevitability of the student’s hybridic understanding-misunderstanding is central to a deconstructive notion of education.⁴ A final claim is that, in a deconstructive pedagogy, the role of the teacher is to witness the student’s genesis as a singular inventor.⁵

RADICAL HERMENEUTIC AUTONOMY

In an early article, Biesta claims that education is constituted by the interplay of “strictly idiosyncratic” perspectives and that its task is to create their cooperative social convergence. He develops this notion of idiosyncratic perspectives further in his more recent discussion of “truths” and “theories”: “[We] have to take our own theories seriously — as truths — in the very same way in which we have to take the theories of others seriously — as truths.”⁶ Now along with Biesta and many deconstructionists, I too assert the educational benefit of resisting the subsumption of perspectives and understandings within a hegemonic metatheory. Indeed, this

pluralist disposition toward truth can allow for meaningful transversal communication as individual prejudices, habits, and beliefs are decentered within a communicative multiplicity. The question is, then, to what extent these are radically or “strictly” idiosyncratic, a question to which we will return below.

Extending this claim, Biesta articulates a pedagogical ethos of “*inventio*” (EA, 110–111), arguing that the pedagogical task is to create opportunities for something “new to emerge on the scene,” a singular inventive “genesis” of the other.⁷ Now to be sure, in Derridean deconstructive pedagogy, we teachers are enjoined to create an “event” by a certain submission to the advent of the wholly other in our responses. However, I suggest that important aspects of that pedagogy recede as Biesta foregrounds strictly *sui generis* student invention. What I wish to underscore here is that such invention is influenced substantially by the iterability of what I call the pedagogical mark. Shifting the perspective from student to teacher, Derrida’s notion of iterability calls for balancing the unequivocally idiosyncratic inventive otherness of the student’s response and the teacher’s iterable performative response to a teaching or text. There is no *inventio ex nihilo* as invention carries traces of predecessors. The student’s invention is not radically other, even as it is singular, since the singular bears and leaves traces. Invention’s singularity is, in large part, how it bears and leaves these remainders. As his associate, friend, and fellow deconstructive literary theorist J. Hillis Miller notes, Derrida’s notion of “invention,” is more akin to discovery or “uncovering” rather than to *inventio ex nihilo*; it is “an uncovering rather than making up.”⁸ When we shift the perspective from that of the student to that of the teacher, then, there appears a larger role for traditions in the function of teaching and learning in a concatenation of repetitions in difference. There are both creation *and* repetition in any invention, or, one could say, there is creation *because of* iterability. I am concerned, then, that Biesta can be read as overemphasizing *ex nihilo* invention, unwittingly eclipsing iterable traditions.

Consistent with emphasizing the idiosyncratic alterity of the interpreter, the “receiver,” or the student, Biesta maintains that “[a] text needs to be read in order to become a text.”⁹ He thus asserts that, for Derrida (and for him), “the *most crucial part* of human communication [is] ... that of interpretation.”¹⁰ Emphasizing what might be construed as a student’s radical hermeneutic autonomy, Biesta goes on to claim that “successful transmission of knowledge or skills from teacher to student depends upon the interpretations by students of what is being taught — interpretations that are *never* determined by the teaching” (EA, 106). The meaning of a teaching, a text, a message, then, lies squarely and exclusively within the student’s reception as interpreter.

The question that I ask at this point is: What is the function of the teacher, the teaching, the text, in this emphasis on the seemingly autonomous inventive hermeneutics of learning? I am not questioning the importance of the learner’s making sense of, adding to, interpreting, or contesting the teacher’s pedagogical inscriptions. But what is the role of the teacher as other, of the text as other? Is there anything like continuing — albeit changing and plural — ideational, discursive legacies in

Biesta's interpretation of Derrida? We will return to this question below as I seek to demonstrate that, for Derrida, a text does not have to be read to become a text. It has to be uttered, written, or gestural as it becomes iterable in the very moment of pedagogical inscription.

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Emphasizing "reception" or "interpretations by students of what is being taught," Biesta foregrounds the inevitability and importance of hybridic understanding-misunderstanding as an essential structural feature of learning (EA, 106). He therefore suggests that, for Derrida, the educational process involves "a certain 'slippage,'" "an imperfection or weakness," "a certain 'opening,'" a disparity between "the intentions of the 'sender,'" and "the interpretation on the side of the 'receiver.'" ¹² So risking misunderstanding, paradoxically, "should be seen as constitutive of communication" (EA, 105). There is thus an ethos of the "gap between teaching and learning," inviting the unforeseen "coming into the world of new beginnings and new beginners" (EA, 107).

For Derrida, however, the enduring possibility of understanding and misunderstanding, while significant, stems from a more primal split in any pedagogical inscription before even a modicum of understanding or misunderstanding takes place. There is a gap *of* and *in the teaching itself*, even as there may be one *between* teaching and learning. Emphasizing the former, Derrida does not use the terms understanding and misunderstanding in "Signature Event Context," (LI, 1–24) the essay that John Searle has criticized as distorting speech act theory and as misconstruing the notion of iterative performative utterance (LI, 26–27). Derrida only introduces these terms in his harshly satirical, polemical response to Searle (in "Limited Inc a, b, c . . ."). ¹³ Even then, Derrida uses multiple qualifiers. Regarding the possibility of Searle's having "understood" him, Derrida suggests: "let us not use the word 'understood,' let us say instead that . . . [he] was touched" (LI, 41). For using the word, "understanding," would require that the concept be "of another order." ¹⁴ So let us consider why, in Derrida's use of "understanding" and "misunderstanding," there appears to be a certain reticence and ambivalence.

First, Derrida maintains that the mark "broaches and breaches [*entame*]" its apparent semantic limits from the moment of inscription: "Intention or attention . . . is divided and deported in advance, by its iterability, towards others, removed in advance from itself. This re-move makes its movement possible" (LI, 56). Now we can readily concede that any mark, upon being interpreted, becomes divided, as there can be no identity between one's intentionality and another's understanding. It is less transparent, however, that this division *precedes* any interpretation: "a priori, always and already, without delay, at once, *aussi sec*" (LI, 62). What is even more difficult to see is how this division takes place if there is *never* a reader, hearer, interpreter, or "receiver" of any kind. The mark is divided in the instant of its articulation "even if it is not remarked"! (LI, 53). "[T]his one time is in itself divided or multiplied in advance by its structure of repeatability" (LI, 48). The differential quality of the iterable mark — and of the teaching, text, or lesson — "splits each element while constituting it, because it marks it with an articulatory break" (LI, 53).

This advanced division gives teaching a demanding performative responsibility, as Claudia Ruitenberg and others argue.¹⁵ But the responsibility is not only to recognize openings for inventiveness on the part of the student, however sound this pedagogical practice is. Iterability recenters the responsibility in the teacher's performance, display of mind, and action because such utterances are divided in advance just as is the text or concept that the teacher is interpreting. The responsibility, in large part, stems from recognizing that no utterance will be identical with anything that we would call intention. In their multiple senses both the "sender and the receiver" (the teacher and the student; the text/subject/concept and the teacher) "each relate to a mark they experience as made to do without them, from the instant of its production or of its reception on" (*LI*, 49). There is, then, a generative, protentional division in the mark that is "the positive condition of its possibility" (*LI*, 49). But, the positive condition is not simply in the potential to be understood or misunderstood. This is *derived* from the split in the mark's inception, in the lesson's inception, in the learning experience itself. If a lesson did not have this iterability, there would be no possibility of its being understood or misunderstood. We are thus left with "no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say *and* would have wanted to say, to understand something other than ... etc." (*LI*, 62).

Derrida expresses greater interest in what the possibility of misunderstanding implies about the language in communication: "And if the supposed misunderstanding were of such a nature ... *what would all that imply? What is taking place* at this very moment, right here?" (*LI*, 37, emphasis added). Part of "what is taking place" is what he calls the mark's functioning even in the "radical absence" of a sender or receiver (*LI*, 8 and 48). So what I suggest is taking place in pedagogy, for Derrida, is an inscribing, the iterability of which "itself ensures that the full presence of a singularity thus repeatedly comports in itself the reference to something else, thus rending the full presence that it nevertheless announces" (*LI*, 129). The utterance's initiatory rending allows for its rendering. This dynamic split between identity and difference demands that writers or teachers perform the singular, present the unrepresentable nonpresence of this split, while they recognize that the utterance that emerges is never simply repetition of the same, but a kind of unprecedented iterative and iterable performance.

WITNESSING

A final related claim concerns the role of witnessing in deconstructive pedagogy. Biesta maintains that when we witness, we are affirming "the impossible, unforeseeable and incalculable event of the in-coming of the other."¹⁶ The teacher, in this view, witnesses openings for the beginner's entrance, for the unforeseeable act of freedom of the "newcomer," for the "self-formative" "performativity of the child."¹⁷ Furthermore, "*everything* that is offered in education," "takes place ... 'by' and 'through'" this student performativity.¹⁸ This unequivocal "everything" and "always" purportedly yield a "simple question" for education, a choice between being "only ... a big reproduction machine" or also an expression of "human freedom."¹⁹ For Biesta, the latter can take place if "we witness the occurrence of

deconstruction in education,” which “may point us towards openings” for an entry of “the event of freedom.”²⁰

I suggest that, when we introduce Derrida’s notions of iterability and witnessing into this discussion, a number of these assertions on witnessing call for revision. In his essay “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing”²¹ Derrida explores the “experience of bearing witness” (*PP*, 66) as the “phenomenology of *attestation*” (*PP*, 84, emphasis added). Witnessing and testifying, for Derrida, are inseparable. The “testamentary witness” is active; she is to “become, invent, institute, offer for reading, in an exemplary way” (*PP*, 65 and 66). What he refers to here as a poem’s possibility can be seen as a pedagogical possibility of a text, a narrative, or concept. The teacher, as witness, testifies in a singular, inventive, “procreative” performance. In this testamentary performative the teacher assumes the exacting responsibility to present, to declare, to mark in a singular way. Thus, the student becomes a discerning judge, “a witness of the witness,” a witness to a pedagogical testimony who “*can still reproduce the essence of it*” (*PP*, 66, emphasis added). A teacher’s witnessing, then, is not only a recognition and submission, it is a performative, active testimony itself. The teacher bears witness to iterable traditions, to concatenations of identity and difference, in a response both to what is being taught and to the student. Pedagogical testimony invites an active response to the iterability of what one witnesses, to which, in turn, students become active, responsive witnesses, and so on.

Such a pedagogy of active, iterable attestation resonates with what Derrida says of his own writing and teaching: “On the one hand, I try to submit myself to the most demanding norms of classical philosophical discussion ... in the most honest and rational way possible ... On the other hand, in so doing I multiply statements, discursive gestures, forms of writing, the structure of which reinforces my demonstration in something like a practical manner” (*LI*, 114). Even as a teacher tries to submit to pedagogical norms rationally and honestly, she multiplies, in a “practical manner,” the forms, contents, and interpretations within her teaching, responding to and creating a “breaking force,” exposing and transcending prior (iterable) understandings (*LI*, 9).

REVISING PURPOSES AND GOALS, PREPARATION AND PLANNING, PEDAGOGICAL CLARITY

Based on the above explanations of iterability and critiques of its interpretations, I suggest that the concept influences a number of aspects of educational theory and practice. First, it is important to note that, for Derrida, a teacher has a “relation to *telos*” within an iterable intentionality (*LI*, 129). Though not self-contained, purposes and goals intimate themselves dynamically, iterably, as one plans and teaches. Though some poststructuralists may disagree with him, Derrida maintains a role for determinacy in teaching because “undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts).” Purposefulness and goals in teaching emerge in “strictly defined situations” with “pragmatically determined” possibilities (*LI*, 148). Conventionally considered, purposes are fulfilled over time, as time is a medium for plenitude, for fulfillment of potentiality. Taking iterability seriously, however, suggests that time becomes a

different kind of medium — “one of alteration and passing,” to use Samuel Weber’s language.²² Teleological progression becomes iterable teleological repetition. But, contrary to the way Derrida is often interpreted, this iterable openness of intentionality does not mean that any text, any content, should be radically open to all reappropriations. The new type of framework responds to the open, but not radically undetermined, question: To what extent, in what way, and in what situational determinations might a lesson or curriculum be fraught with the more pressing, interesting possibilities for repetition with difference? This emphasis on contextual iterable possibilities thus changes much of the way we consider the nature of educational goals.

Moreover, taking iterability seriously suggests that, due to the split in any utterance, conflict is embedded in the content that is to be taught. So planning for teaching demands a response to this ineluctable conflict as teachers interpret. Such planning does not, then, imply an effort to transmit a self-identical content or to “cover” material. The instantaneous split and what Derrida calls the dissemination of the mark suggest that what remains of notions of content or context is agonistic. Therefore, when we prepare a lesson, there are silent or expressed polemical dynamics. Because of these ineluctable conflictual perturbations, any decision on what or how to teach, what to include or exclude, will have a certain ambivalence as the teacher engages dissonant meanings.

So what implications might this structural ambivalence have for what we would call pedagogical clarity? Based on our interpretation of Derrida, the purpose for clarity is to make the teacher’s teachings iterable, to make the divided/dividing utterance present a demand for interpretation *and* for a limited, albeit essential, manner of repetition. Citing Weber again, any notion of clarity would now have to be considered “as an after-effect of the possible rather than as its actualization or implementation.”²³ As an after-effect, “[i]terability belongs more to the future and to the past than to the present because it never comes full circle, never comes to rest in a simple, straightforward identity.”²⁴ Therefore, the pedagogical challenge is to provide, to one degree or another, intelligible inscriptions that are dynamic, that never come to rest as self-contained, yet evoke meaningful response.

HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES

The notion of iterability also assists us in making distinctions between inquiry into the sciences and the humanities. In much scientific experimentation, for example, repetition, in the sense of replication, is essential. A scientific experiment is efficacious if it can be repeated. Successful teaching in the humanities, however, involves iterable alteration in any recurrence.²⁵ Seeing this distinction between the need to replicate the experiment and the need to interpret the iterable text, teachers may adjust their perspectives toward intended outcomes, depending on the purpose and nature of repetition in their disciplines. The differential roles for iterability in these respective disciplines could be a fruitful line of inquiry at a time when the efficacy of the humanities in many institutions of higher learning is being subjected to question.

BECOMING OTHER

What becomes clearer now is that preparing for a teaching or learning experience involves preparing for “becoming other,” for “quasi-transcendental, structuring possibilities,” as Weber observes in considering Walter Benjamin’s related concept of translatability. If a text or a teaching is not self-identical, if it ruptures in the moment of utterance, it then must be changing; it “is perpetually in the process of alteration, transformation, becoming-other” (*BA*, 59). In other words, preparing the lesson is preparing for the content or text to journey on, to travel. If a lesson plan must move, becoming something other than a self-contained intentionality, it must, paradoxically, become different from itself in order to be a lesson. And the paradox of iterability here is similar to what Benjamin considers to be that of translatability. The lesson plan, the intended outcome, the purpose of teaching a particular subject, or ultimately the event of teaching and learning, “acquires significance only through what comes after it in order to become what alone it can never be.” A teaching experience can be assessed as successful, “only insofar as it goes outside of itself and is transformed into something else, something other” (*BA*, 62). Put differently, teaching can be considered alive when it “names a movement in which life, paradoxically enough, is only rendered ‘present’ by expending itself, that is, by opening itself to a movement of iteration in which it is constantly being altered.” Simply put, teachings, to be teachings, must “have an afterlife” (*BA*, 66).

With humility we need, then, to assume the possibility of a “break up” of the lesson, even as we seek to teach in hopes of iterable and iterative tracings. Teaching cannot be based on a pure, saturated intentionality. Taking iterability seriously, then, would suggest that in order for teaching to function, it must, like a signature, have a “repeatable, iterable, imitable form” that can “detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production” (*LI*, 108). Transcending the signature of the event of teaching, this divisibility and survivability of the pedagogical mark can provide a new way to consider the effect(iveness) of teaching. Just as there are differences in the kind or extent of iterability in literature or art, there are differences in the qualitative, propulsive force of iterability in different kinds of education. A question that is asked, then, is how can learning experiences become more “communicable, transmittable, decipherable, iterable” in light of this break in presence? (*LI*, 8). We seek, then, to create experiences that provide students with capacities for “the uncanny recognition of something that, in being the same, reveals itself to be different.”²⁶ Fidelity to the learning experience is, paradoxically, the commitment to change it.

CONCLUSION

The pedagogical mark’s iterability demands that teaching, like writing, “must continue to act” in a perduring process of repeating and altering. The notions of teacher responsibility and interpretive generativity (suggested by iterability) counter a number of claims in the literature on deconstruction. Notwithstanding the great value and insight of Biesta and other theorists of deconstruction in education, I have argued against interpretations of Derrida that claim the radical autonomy of the

student, the strict divergence of individual truths from one another, an excessive displacement of the teacher by student interpretation, the understanding-misunderstanding amalgam in student comprehension, and a pedagogy of passive (albeit vigilant) withdrawal in order to foster student invention.

Perhaps the most important implication of iterability for education is expressed in Derrida's final interview. One can interpret his words here, in part, as a reflection on how language and teaching might function in the absence of the teacher, when the teacher is no longer there:

Spoken or written, all these gestures leave us: they start to act independently of us, like machines or, at best, like puppets ... At the moment that I allow "my" book to be published (no one makes me do it), I begin to appear-and disappear, like some unteachable ghost who never learned how to live.²⁷

We assume a certain responsibility and accept a kind of loss when we recognize that our gestures and teachings "leave us" as flickering pedagogical marks, acting without us. This happens at the moment of utterance, not only years later. The teacher's moment of utterance is but a ghostly companion. Structurally unreplicable, the teaching is, nevertheless, iterable. What Judith Butler suggests regarding Derrida's statement might also help us understand the iterable afterlife of teaching as the "operation of language" that "is at once ghostly and animated."²⁸

1. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 141, emphasis added. This work will be cited as *LI* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. In this essay, I make reference to the following partial list of Gert Biesta's work: "Education, Not Initiation," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* 1996, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997): 90–98; "Preparing for the Incalculable": Deconstruction, Justice, and the Question of Education," in *Derrida and Education*, eds. Gert J. Biesta and Denise Egéa-Kuehne (London: Routledge, 2001), 32–54; "Deconstruction, Justice, and the Vocation of Education," in *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy*, eds. Michael A. Peters and Gert Biesta (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 15–38; "Education After Deconstruction: Between Event and Invention," in *Ibid.*, 97–112; "Witnessing Deconstruction in Education: Why Quasi-Transcendentalism Matters," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009): 391–404; and "This Is My Truth. Tell Me Yours: Deconstructive Pragmatism as a Philosophy for Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 7 (2010): 710–727.

3. Biesta, "Education After Deconstruction"; this work will be cited as *EA* in the text for all subsequent references; Biesta, "Education, Not Initiation"; and Biesta, "This Is My Truth."

4. Biesta, "Education After Deconstruction"; and Biesta, "Preparing for the Incalculable."

5. Biesta, "Education After Deconstruction."

6. Biesta, "This Is My Truth," 725.

7. Biesta, "Education After Deconstruction," 111; and Biesta, "Deconstruction, Justice, and the Vocation of Education," 33.

8. J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009), 6.

9. Biesta, "Deconstruction, Justice, and the Vocation of Education," 18.

10. Biesta, "Witnessing Deconstruction in Education," 397.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Derrida, *LI*, 26, 37, 40, 41, 51, and 61.

14. Ibid., 146. Derrida's ambivalence toward the notion of misunderstanding may also be discerned in his parodic repetitions of Searle's use of the term, such as "the hypothesis in [the key of] mis," Ibid., 41–42 (original italics, brackets in Weber's translation).
15. I do think, however, that Claudia Ruitenberg, drawing on Judith Butler, comes close to interpreting iterability primarily as appropriability, rather than in Derrida's broader, more pervasive sense. This, however, would be the subject of a separate essay. See, for example, Claudia Ruitenberg, "Don't Fence Me In: The Liberation of Undomesticated Critique," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 3 (2004). Claudia Ruitenberg, "Discourse, Theatrical Performance, Agency: The Analytic Force of 'Performativity' in Education," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2008): 260–268; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005).
16. Biesta, "Witnessing Deconstruction in Education," 400–401.
17. Biesta, "Education, Not Initiation," 91 and 97.
18. Ibid., 91, emphasis added.
19. Biesta, "Witnessing Deconstruction in Education," 400.
20. Ibid., 394.
21. Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Jacques Derrida, Thomas Dutoit, and Outi Pasanen (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), 67. This work will be cited as *PP* in the text for all subsequent references.
22. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 121. This work will be cited as *BA* in the text for all subsequent references. A major figure in deconstruction and contemporary literary theory, Weber is a long-time friend of Derrida, and translator of his work.
23. Samuel Weber, "After Deconstruction," in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, ed. Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 148.
24. Ibid.
25. Samuel Weber, "Ambivalence, the Humanities and the Study of Literature," *Diacritics* 15, no. 2 (1985): 11–25.
26. Samuel Weber, as quoted in Simon Morgan Wortham, *Samuel Weber: Acts of Reading* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 117.
27. Jacques Derrida, "Jacques Derrida 1930–2004: The Last Interview," *SV Studio Visit* (New York: kmap, 2004), 8.
28. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 142, n. 17.