

## The (Im)possible Gift of Education

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Cecilia Diego writes, “Gifting in education is *impossible*.” I would like, if I may, begin by looking at this word “gifting.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “gift” as a verb has been used since the seventeenth century. Like the noun “gift,” it comes from the Old English *asgift*, which meant “payment for a wife,” or in the plural form, “wedding,” with its implication of dowries. In Middle Dutch and Old High German, the word had the same meaning associated with monetary value. In the *History of France*, we find the following sentence: “Parents were prohibited from selling, gifting, or pledging their children”<sup>1</sup> (rather shocking, as it implies that they did, but it is still happening in some countries). Then, “gift” as a verb fell into disuse until 1924, when the United States Congress introduced a “gift tax.” Repealed in 1926, it was revised, updated, and, in 1932, was reinstated. This tax was levied by the Internal Revenue Service “on the transfer of property by one individual to another while receiving nothing, or less than full value, in return.”<sup>2</sup> Note that this “gift tax” was “receiving nothing ... in return.” When the tax code changed, from the “gift tax” came the expression “gifting money.” Mostly confined to the context of taxes, a 1995 episode of *Seinfeld* brought it again to attention, when the words “re-gift,” “de-gift,” and “re-gifter” were repeatedly used, following the passing off of an unwanted gift (a label-maker).<sup>3</sup> By 2009, the word had gained enough traction for Ellen DeGeneres to center one of her monologues on “gifting,” and “re-gifting gifts.”<sup>4</sup>

So far, what characterizes “gifting” from the origin of the word “gift” and its association with “payment” and “dowry” through “gift tax” and from the notion of “re-gifting” is its reference to money in one form or another. What, you may ask, does this have to do with education, or with philosophy of education, or with philosophy? Bear with me, and we will come to Derrida and his concept of the gift as characterized by an-economy.

Before we come to Derrida though, I would like to bring to your attention the fact that, more recently, the term “gifting” has met with tremendous success in the fields of advertising and marketing, flourishing as the epitome of materialism and consumption. Add to this its proliferation in the corporate world with “corporate gifting” and “extreme gifting.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Given Time*, Derrida wrote, “Now the gift ... would no doubt be related to economy ... even to money economy.”<sup>6</sup> But then, a sentence later, he asked, “But is not the gift ... also that which interrupts economy?,” that is, in terms of Derrida’s understanding of the gift, clearly explained by Diego in her account of the four characteristics of the gift: it must be impossible; it must be forgotten; it must be aneconomic; it must be limitless. Diego reminds us that Caputo called these traits “the *aporias* of the gift.”<sup>7</sup>

So if we are talking about the gift of education, faced with these insoluble *aporias*, what is the likelihood of being able to deliver education as Diego describes it

in her distinction between school and schooling? Diego tells us that, in this case, we need “impossible teaching.”

In this response, I draw on Derrida’s texts to discuss “the possibility of the impossible.”<sup>8</sup> Derrida has extensively analyzed double injunctions, contradictions, aporias, and ambiguities, and his writings can help us understand the paradox of the gift Diego discusses in her essay. In *The Other Heading*, Derrida wrote about “a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention*.”<sup>9</sup> He linked this concept — this condition of possibility being dependent on the simultaneous necessity of a condition of impossibility — to a notion of messianism, to the experience of the promise. It is by opening a space for the affirmation of this promise, of the “messianic and emancipatory promise as promise,”<sup>10</sup> of the impossible event as a promise, that it will preserve its capital of possibilities, of dynamic ideal-in-the-making, to come.

The possibility, the eventuality of this promise of education, is absolutely dependent on its preserving within itself hope, but a hope, a promise, which can never be expected, anticipated, or identified as such. Because, like the gift, the moment it is identified as such, it loses its very possibility of being a promise. Derrida wrote, “If one could *count* on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program.”<sup>11</sup> The following words written by Derrida about democracy can aptly be applied to the promise of education, which cannot be a promise unless it “always keeps within ... this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event *and* of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated,”<sup>12</sup> which *must not* be anticipated lest it would simply not be. For Derrida, the messianic and the promise were inseparable. In the sense that this hope is not utopian and that it has to do with “the coming of an eminently real, concrete event,”<sup>13</sup> it is tightly linked to the promise and to the concept of to-come.

Derrida saw the “messianic structure,” what he calls “messianicity,”<sup>14</sup> as having everything to do with faith. For him, the concepts of to-come and the promise were closely tied to the pledge, to commitment, and in his texts (especially those having to do with “the unconditional university”<sup>15</sup>), he repeatedly utilized those terms, along with “a pledge,” “a commitment,” “a promise,” “an act of faith,” “a declaration of faith,” “a profession of faith” and “act of sworn faith.”<sup>16</sup> Derrida explained how this kind of faith could not be further from utopia and utopic thinking. On the contrary, if met with responsibility, it is a faith which calls for action, which strives toward a possible future which, because it is always in-the-making, à *venir*, remains a dynamic expectation and a promise of something to come.

This tension between education today and the faith in a better education constitute the force behind a thinking which “calls for the coming of an event, i.e., calls precisely for that which ‘changes,’”<sup>17</sup> that which helps shape an educational world where school — school as opposed to schooling in Diego’s frame — would be reified.

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1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

2. “26 U.S.C. § 2501 – Imposition of Tax,” Legal Information Institute, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/26/2501>, accessed November 5, 2015.
3. Seinfeld, “The Label Maker.” Season 6, Episode 12. Directed by Andy Ackerman. Written by Alec Berg and Jeff Schaffer, NBC, original air date January 19, 1995, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VGbY-6sirHM>, accessed June 30, 2015.
4. Ellen DeGeneres, “Monologue – Regifting.” The Ellen Degeneres Show. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=27&v=0P343bNidWk>, accessed June 30, 2015.
5. See, for example, “Corporate Gifting,” Brand-Ad Solutions, <http://brandad.co.in/corporate-gifting.html>, accessed June 30, 2015. Neff Jack, “Has Extreme Gifting Gone Too Far,” *Advertising Age*, September 10, 2012, <http://adage.com/article/news/extreme-gifting/237033/>, accessed June 30, 2015.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.
7. John D. Caputo, “Teaching the Event: Deconstruction, Hauntology, and the Scene of Pedagogy,” *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 23, <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/3597/1218> 24, 3.
8. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41. Another prominent philosopher, Derrida’s teacher, mentor, and friend, Emmanuel Levinas, also often elaborates on the “idea of a possibility in which the impossible may sleep.” *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 89.
9. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 41 (emphasis in original).
10. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 169.
12. *Ibid.*, 65.
13. Jacques Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Specters of Marx.”*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1992), 248.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Jacques Derrida has spoken and published numerous times about “the university without condition.” See, for example, the Stanford lecture written in response to an invitation for the Presidential Lecture Series in the Humanities and Arts hosted by President Gerhard Casper of Stanford University and organized by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in 1999. Originally titled “The Future of the Profession; or, The University Without Condition (Thanks to the ‘Humanities,’ What *Could Take Place Tomorrow*),” it was published under the shorter title “The University Without Condition,” in *Without Alibi*, Peggy Kamuf, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202–37. With minor variations, the same lecture was delivered at the University of Albany – SUNY on October 11, 1999, under the title “The Future of the Profession or the Unconditional University.” It was hosted by Tom Cohen, Chair of the English Department, and David Wills, Chair of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. Under its longer title “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (Thanks to the ‘Humanities,’ What *Could Take Place Tomorrow*),” Tom Cohen included this text in the collection he edited titled *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 24–57.
16. See n. 15.
17. Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” 257.