Pedagogical Maturity: The Ontology of Teaching and Being Taught-by

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I want to begin this phenomenological investigation of pedagogical maturity with a famous Tibetan Buddhist saying that goes, "Do not mistake understanding for realization."[1] For as Sogyal Rinpoche cautions, "We often assume that simply because we understand something intellectually or think we do, we have actually realized it. This is a great delusion … [For realization] requires the *maturity* of years of listening, contemplation, reflection, meditation, and *sustained practice* to ripen."[2] For what it's worth, I've been carrying around this Buddhist "tip" on living for over 20 years and have often found myself unwittingly referring to its insightfulness as I reflect on my "sustained practice" as a teacher.

Indeed, after years of listening, reflecting, and contemplating on what goes on in my classroom, I have come to the realization that I "really" do not know what my students are "really" thinking when, say, I lecture on Plato's *Republic*. Often we appear to be getting along well in class but I'm never completely certain if I'm "reading" the situation correctly. To deal with this uncertainty between my students and me, I solicit feedback from them to help me understand my own pedagogical efforts and how it affects them. Regardless, I've often felt a sort of nebulous anxiety regarding the epistemological divide between us, which I fully understand can never be completely bridged.

Then, one day, I came to the *realization* that this divide, this space of unknowing between my students and me was okay. I neither planned it nor anticipated it. Indeed, I suddenly felt comfortable with this realization, this double space of unknowing where, on the one hand I will never fully know what's going on with my students while I teach them, and on the other hand there are actual, epistemological, and ontological spaces between them and

me—in that, they are not me, and I am not them!

In all of this, I realized simply that I am their teacher, nothing more, and nothing less! As their teacher, I still gather feedback from my classes, however; where I once held a feeling of unease, now I'm at home with the fact that there are aspects of teaching that are out of my grasp, or more pointedly, perhaps I'm finally home *in* my teaching. And from this realization, I began to wonder: have I finally arrived at a place of "maturity" in my teaching? Is this sense of being-at-home in my teaching what I've been hoping to attain, albeit unknowingly, after all these years?

Honestly, I have no clear-cut response to these questions, hence the genesis of this article and my investigation into "pedagogical maturity," for a lack of a better term. For, if it is the case that I have perhaps matured in my teaching, then, I wonder, in more precise terms what is the nature of this pedagogical maturity? What does the formation of pedagogical maturity tell me about the project that I've committed my life's energy to: teaching and education itself? That is, under *what* conditions and in *what* ways does pedagogical maturity speak to the ontology of teaching and being taught by?

Within this context then, while I'm thankful for the Buddhist insight, this exploration will not be framed within Buddhist terms. Rather, I want to pick up the trail of pedagogical maturity and engage in a phenomenological endeavor, one that rests more on my own indigenous experiences and thinking about education. As such, Gert Biesta, whose insights revolving around students being "taught by" the teacher plays a major role in this paper, as well as D.W. Winnicott, whose insights revolving around what it means to be "mature"— that capacity to be alone in the presence of another—also plays a major role in this study. My tack will be to bring these authors into conversation, with Biesta highlighting the *pedagogical* and Winnicott highlighting the discussion on *maturity*.

EMPHASIS MATTERS

To begin I want to focus on the two terms at stake here, pedagogy and maturity, and take a thought experiment with each of them, imagining what it

would be like to experience the world through the eyes of the **pedagogical**, and then through the eyes of **maturity**. Taking this tack, we will notice that there is no solid foundation to pedagogical maturity; instead this couplet is rather like a Gestalt figure, and depending on one's emphasis the figure conceptually shifts. This shifting essence suggests that pedagogical maturity is essentially an unstable phenomenon. As such, it would seem that in order to disclose the essence of pedagogical maturity we need to grasp that *emphasis matters*, as each term brings with it a weight of importance, a tipping point that discloses what's important from its perspective.

Given that each term, pedagogical and maturity, exerts a conceptual weight, I close by suggesting that while each term founds[3] the other—in the phenomenological sense where each term has to be understood against the background of the other—the scale nonetheless tips towards maturity. For pedagogy, as I will show, emphasizes a *continuous* communicative relationship, a relationship of tacit cooperation between teacher and student. Maturity reveals the ontological capacity for teacher and student to be with each other in a non-communicative relationship, one where each can tolerate being alone in the presence of the other. This is to say that they are able to form a *contiguous* relationship with each other, where each is able to stand-with the other in close emotional proximity, without assuming a defensive posture, one that would impede the relationship. As such, maturity relies on the pedagogical to draw it out of our background understanding and bring it out into the light of our daily practices. Further, and what's at stake here, is that without a clear awareness of the non-communicative, contiguous relationship of maturity, we are libel to miss the ontological limits, dangers, and potential trauma inherit in communicative endeavors between the teacher and her students.

PEDAGOGICAL MATURITY I

When we emphasize the **pedagogical**, we are focusing on teaching itself. Teaching, in turn, is an interesting term in that it is a verbal noun. That is, teaching entails a verb, an action occurring, and a noun, a location, a place, a

site of that action for teaching to occur. Gert Biesta's notion of students being taught by a teacher best illustrates the verbal aspect in teaching.

In his book, *The Beautiful Risk of* Education,[4] Gert Biesta highlights the notions of transcendence and communication as essential to teaching and education. Here Biesta's concerns revolve around, "the disappearance of teaching and the demise of the role of the teacher as someone who has something to say and something to bring"[5] to the student, hence the teacher's relation to the notion of transcendence. By bringing transcendence to the forefront, Biesta is suggesting an alternative to the Socratic account of teaching as a maieutic act of bringing forth student knowledge through recollection. As such, the pedagogical moment is student centered, where the teacher's role, as Biesta argues, is accidental to the student's learning, serving merely to facilitate in the learning process.

Indeed, for Biesta what makes the teacher and teaching essential to education is that without the transcendent moment, there can be no revelation for the student, no "aha" moment. Why? Because the transcendental moment is a revelation, a moment of realization, a realization by the student that the teacher *is* essential in that she can offer something that lies outside the student's world, something that perhaps matters to the student—a subjective truth, like my Tibetan "tip," operating as a truth that informs my life situations. So, if teaching is to be, "essential rather than accidental to learning, then it comes with a notion of transcendence. It is to be understood as something that comes from the *outside* and brings something *radically new.*"[6]

Notice that revelation is the transcendental moment, the moment of realization by the student that the teacher is not merely other to her; rather the teacher can offer the student something radically new, something that lies beyond the student's current horizon of understanding. This radically and unexpectedly new moment is something akin to the child peering into a microscope for the very first time to observe the eyes of a fly. Indeed, for my granddaughter, seeing the many eyes of the fly for the first time literally stopped her world for a moment, as it took her breath away. As such:

> *To learn from someone is a radically different experience from the*
> *experience of being taught by someone …* [where] we more often
> than not refer to experiences where someone showed us
> something or made us realize something that really entered
> our being from outside.[7]

Paradoxically being *taught by* the teacher decenters not only the student's control over the pedagogical process but the teacher's as well. For:

> whether someone will be taught by the teacher lies beyond
> the control and power of the teacher … [As] the teacher
> has to be understood as a *sporadic* identity, an identity that
> only emerges at those moments when the gift of teaching
> is received.[8]

That is, a student's moment of revelation is not something that can be given intentionally by the teacher, in the sense of the teacher having control or power over the effects of giving. Rather there can be no giving of revelation per se according to Biesta, only the offering itself, and perhaps the acceptance by the student of an unanticipated "gift" from the teacher. Again, this is like the teacher offering the child the opportunity to peer into the microscope at the fly's eyes. Whether or not the child will embrace this moment is an open question, for the moment of revelation comes with no guarantees; another student peering into the microscope may be *nonplussed*. When revelation happens, strangely there's a shift in emphasis from the student back to the teacher, in that the student is tacitly willing to give authority to the teacher to teach, and hence be taught by.

Given this "give and take" interaction between student and teacher, it can be said that this relationship is *continuous* in nature, one of tacit cooperation between the teacher and the student. Further, as Biesta points out:

> Common understanding is not a precondition for human
> cooperation but should rather be seen as an outcome of
> it … [and where] in Dewey's view action comes first and
> transformation of understanding follows from it … [with
> the understanding that] those forms of collective action in

which all those who take part have an interest in the activity
and can contribute to decisions and about its direction.[9]

In short, for Biesta (and Dewey), communication entails active participation, where in participation with others, new possibilities are created, and the unexpected can happen—such at the possibility of a gift of teaching. As such, we become aware of a dialogical circuit, a *continuous* loop of communication between the teacher and the student. (This is not to say that the student doesn't withdraw to think about what's being said; rather the student, when participating, is an integral player in the creation of a shared world.)

Indeed, D.W. Winnicott would view this shared world as a transitional third space that lies between teacher and student, a third area of human living: "that of play, which expands into creative living and into the whole cultural life of man (sic) … I have located this important area of experience in the potential space between the individual and the environment, that which initially joins and separates."[10] This transitional space of play, in turn, develops a sense of trust for the student which, "can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living."[11] As we switch emphasis to maturity we will follow this trail of the sacred within the formation of creative living.

PEDAGOGICAL MATURITY II

In our discussion of the pedagogical, I noted the play between teaching as a verb and as a noun, and that this play is a matter of emphasis. As a verb Biesta's discussion of being taught by illustrates the action of teaching as it forms a *continuous* communicative relationship with the student. However, when viewed as a noun, teaching can be said to form a *contiguous* non-communicative relationship between teacher and student. That is, in order for the teacher to teach the student, there must be a facilitating environment in play that affords the teacher and student the possibility to be with each other in a non-defensive posture—that is to say each can *stand* to be with the other. As such, to emphasize maturity shifts teaching from a verb to a noun: a site, and an environment that

facilitates the student to not only receive the offering but also to realize it as something that can matter to her. For this to occur, the minimal ontological condition is that the student can emotionally tolerate standing with the teacher within a shared space.

This shared space in turn becomes a special, facilitating place, where perhaps we can think of it as an asylum in the sense of being a place of refuge, and where for a brief time the events of the world are bracketed out, forming a temporal moratorium, a slowing down, perhaps a halting of time altogether, as in my granddaughter's experiencing the awe of a fly's eyes. It is at this moment of revelation that the child can be said to be alone and in the presence of another, her teacher. This moment of being alone in the presence of another discloses an emotional proximity whereby teacher and student can be said to be *contiguous* with each other; they are with each other, and yet emotionally separate from each other in a non-communicative engagement, and where importantly each is relaxed in the presence of the other, without judgment without evaluation. Here, the student can live in a singular way without the teacher reducing the student's experience to some preconceived pedagogical theory or some educational insight. And here the pedagogical engagement draws out an extraordinary moment that lies hidden in ordinary student-teacher interactions. This moment—of being alone in the presence of another—is what D. W. Winnicott refers to as maturity!

For Winnicott, the capacity to be alone "is so nearly synonymous with emotion maturity."[12] Maturity, the capacity of being alone, is a developmental capacity for the infant, and by extension for the adult it is an achievement. Winnicott states, "The basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present."[13] As a developmental capacity, maturity is linked with one's ability to feel relaxed and at home in the world rather than isolated or disconnected. Indeed, "when one is alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do the equivalent of what in an adult would be called relaxing."[14]

This emerging capacity to be mature—to be alone in the presence of another—enables the child, or adult, to relax and hence engage in play. For the child, this would be like her building a sand castle on the beach while the

parents look on. Here the child engages in imaginative play, paradoxically alone in her imagination, while her parent, say, reads a novel in a chair next to her. For adults, Winnicott likens maturity with the capacity for intimacy between consenting adult partners. He states that, "Being able to enjoy being alone along with another person who is also alone is in itself an experience of health… [it is to] enjoy sharing solitude."[15] Hence mature sharing has double locations: a shared world, and a shared place of solitude.

We might ask what brings the child and caregiver into an emotional proximity with the other such that the child can begin to tolerate being alone in the presence of another. For Winnicott, it is ego-relatedness. Why? Because as Winnicott suggests, the infant when alone is in an *immature* state, hence unable to support herself emotionally, and as such she lacks ego-strength to feel secure in the world. As such, the caregiver provides ego-strength to the infant by nurturing her physical and emotional needs. That is, the caregiver's ego-involvement provides emotional support for the immature ego of the infant. Thus, "ego-relatedness refers to the relationship between two people, one of who at any rate is alone; perhaps both are alone, yet the presence of each is important to the other."[16] In a healthy relationship, the infant matters to the caregiver, and the caregiver is important to the infant, albeit unknowingly, as the caregiver provides the necessary environment for the infant to grow, and to gradually mature into the world, thanks to a facilitating environment that allows them to be with each other.

The facilitating environment, then, is constituted as the mother (or caregiver) identifies with her infant, which allows the infant to internalize the "existence of a reliable mother whose reliability makes it possible for the infant to be alone and to enjoy being alone, for a limited period."[17] The capacity to be alone in the presence of another, then:

> Depends on the existence of a good object in the psychic reality of the individual … [And where], *maturity* and the capacity to be alone implies that the individual has had the chance through good-enough mothering to build up a belief in a benign environment.[18]

In health the "ego-supported environment is internalized and gradually becomes a part of the child's, and hence the adult's personality."[19]

Significantly, however, towards the end of his life, Winnicott worried about the caregiver's intrusion into the private domain of the child's inner core— their selfhood. Indeed, in the developmental process of the child maturing and developing the capacity to be alone, he worried about the possible intrusive attempts by analysis and the need for interpretation of the patient, and where the efforts of interpretation goes too far, causing trauma. This intrusion into one's inner psychic core unfolds according to Winnicott within the domain of communication.

For Winnicott, in the best possible circumstances, growth and maturity take place along three lines of communication: " … in communication that is *for ever silent*, communication that is *explicit*, indirect, and pleasurable, and the third or *intermediate* form of communication that slides out of playing into the cultural experience of every kind."[20] It is easy to see that the third kind of communication, the intermediate, is the mode of communication involved when someone is playing with another, or when the teacher is teaching and interacting with students. The second is verbal language games that are both indirect and explicit, where the child explores "various techniques for indirect communication," such as winking, nodding, etc.

Winnicott's major concern is with the first instance of communication, that which is *forever silent*. It is here, one being forever silent, that he makes his biggest insights on the nature and dangers of communication with one's inner self. He boldly puts forth the claim: "I am introducing the idea of a communication with subjective objects and at the same time the idea of an active non-communication with that which … [involves] the core of the self, that which could be called the true self."[21] Subjective objects are objects created by the infant, very much like Biesta's notion of subjective truth where the object that the student finds has always been there. The trick is to afford the student the opportunity to "find" it and subject the object to one's own scrutiny, thereby allowing the student the opportunity to "discover" the object for herself, hence finding the object makes it "real," and meaningful to the student. So, in the play

of teaching and being taught by the student creates meaning and mattering when the object offered becomes something that they feel they found, as a personal discovery, a gift, and hence a subjective object.

But, what of active non-communication? In the interaction between infant and caregiver or teacher and student, while there are creative elements that come forth, there are also compromising moments and asymmetrical power relations that take place between individuals. As such, the child or student can't always get what they want; in compromise one must let go of some parts of their psychic world that matter to them. When this fear of compromise is pushed too far, as in asymmetrical power relations, the child or student may feel the need to protect the "core" of their selfhood by refusing to partake in the communicative interaction. As such, Winnicott states that the individual has, the right not to communicate—that is, a right not to participate, in Biesta's (and Dewey's) call for communicative participating. Why? Because Winnicott felt that each individual has a right to protest, "the frightening fantasy of being infinitely exploited."[22] As such, he feared the violation of one's inner core by the other even in the case of a therapist or teacher whose intensions are meant to be helpful.

So, if we accept Winnicott's notion of the right to not communicate as a protest against the violation of one's inner core, then it is plausible to suggest that the relationship between individuals, say teacher and student, is best when the teacher realizes and respects the other as a sovereign being having the right to say no to unwanted intrusion. If one respects the student's right to say no, tacitly affirming "real" boundaries that exist between one individual and another, then the right to non-communication is more than a protest—it is an ontological necessity, as the safety of the self is at stake. As such, if non-communication expresses the boundary between us, then we can claim that from the perspective of maturity, one's relation to another is always *contiguous*.

Why? Because at the heart of Winnicott's claim for the right of non-communication is a surprising idea:

I suggest that this core of [selfhood] never communicates

> with the world of perceived objects, and that the individual person knows that it must never be communicated with or influenced by external reality…[Hence], although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, *that each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound*…[As such], at the centre of each person is an incommunicado element, and this is sacred and worthy of preservation.[23]

For Winnicott, what is at stake is the *sacred*: that private space of selfhood. And paradoxically it "is a picture of a child establishing a private self that is not communicating, and at the same time wanting to communicate and be found. It is a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which *it is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found.*"[24]

As such, the Self is an elusive "player of hide and seek." Given that the self is elusive, and permanently unfound, the trauma to the self is, "the threat of being found, altered, communicated with"[25] at one's core. Trauma is the tampering with one's right to hide, hence one's right to selfhood.

THE ONTOLOGY OF TEACHING AND BEING TAUGHT BY

Pedagogical maturity, if I can use this term, is a realization—but a realization of *what*? That much in the classroom eludes us, as student and teacher exist, albeit unwittingly, in a game of hide and seek with each other, and where in this game emphasis matters. That is, to be seen emphasizes the pedagogical, as one appears in a *continuous* loop of communication. To hide is to lean towards maturity—the recognition of one's right to be alone in the presence of another—and with this maturity comes the realization and responsibility to affirm the student as a separate sovereign person with their own distinct inner world that must remain unfound by the other. Without this awareness the teacher, as Winnicott cautions, runs the risk of intrusion into the private, incommunicado element—the "sacred" space of the student—hence causing trauma, perhaps unwittingly. Pedagogy is risky business indeed! And if we are to find the risk beautiful, then as teachers we need to be aware of the ontological limits of

communication and the inherit dangers that avail themselves if we are not "mature" in our teaching.

Indeed. But how does one attain this "maturity"? Maturity seems a lot like Biesta's sporadic teacher identity, in that maturity is sporadic in its realization. I didn't expect it! Perhaps then, our greatest hope for maturity is to understand that pedagogy and maturity find each other—each brings forth the other, and each relies on the other to be seen. Perhaps through mindful, sustained practice, the pedagogical might draw maturity out of the background and bring it into the light of our daily practices.

But how, how does one move from critical understanding to realization? For Biesta, as discussed earlier, he asks us to think transcendence with regards to the nature of teaching and being taught by. Thinking transcendentally, in turn, requires that we see transcendence as something more than someone who is not-me; it entails that, "we should be open to the possibility that something more radically different might break through."[26] This "radical break through" in being taught by the teacher paradoxically lies beyond the teacher's intention. That which is beyond our intentions evokes, for me, the notion of a radical phenomenological reduction of teaching. That is:

> The radical reduction is nonintentional: it cannot be reduced
> to the consciousness of the subject … [As such], the meaning
> of an event lies not primarily in what happens in the present
> but rather in the significance the event acquires in the un-
> folding of its latency … its latent consequence.[27]

Here the moment of maturity in teaching unfolds not as an intentional act but rather as the "latent consequence" of sustained practice in teaching. As such, maturity then does not reside in the teacher's consciousness, nor can it be attained by any formulaic rubric, critical or otherwise. Rather it resides in the event of teaching itself, where the event of teaching offers the teacher a radical break through, a gift: pedagogical maturity.

1 Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 126.

2 Ibid., 164 (emphasis added).

3 See Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24.

4 Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, Paradigm Press, 2014), 56.

5 Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*, 56.

6 Ibid., 52.

7 Ibid., 53.

8 Ibid., 54.

9 Ibid., 33-34.

10 D.W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (Madison: International Universities, 1958/1996), 31.

11 D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 103.

12 D.W. Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating … ," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (Madison: International Universities, 1963/1996), 188.

13 Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone," 30.

14 Ibid., 34.

15 Ibid., 31.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 33.

18 Ibid., 32, emphasis added.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Winnicott, "Communicating and Not Communicating," 184.

22 Ibid., 179.

23 Ibid., 187.

24 Ibid., 186.

25 Ibid., 187.

26 Biesta, *Beautiful Risk*, 49.

27 Max Van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014), 234.