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## Scenes from Calypso's Cave: On Globalization and the Pedagogical Prospects of the Gift

*In this article we use a series of ordinary classroom events to explore how we might conceive of the classroom as a gift economy and what difference this would make for thinking through the potential globalizing effects of the Internet, especially given the intense current interest in introducing such technologies into the classroom.*

*Dans cet article, les auteurs exploitent une série d'événements quotidiens en salle de classe dans le but d'explorer la possibilité de concevoir la salle de classe comme une économie du don d'une part, et l'influence qu'exercent ces effets potentiellement mondialisants de l'Internet d'autre part. Cette question est d'autant plus pertinente que l'intérêt que l'on porte actuellement à l'intégration de ce genre de technologie en salle de classe est énorme.*

### Introduction

Borders have been crossed and re-crossed since the dawn of human civilization. If globalization is something new, it must involve more than a series of proliferating cross border exchanges. As people have thought about the contemporary period, it is not so much that borders are crossed or even opened up. Rather it is that they are *transcended*. Global phenomena are those that extend across widely dispersed locations simultaneously and can move between places anywhere on the earth simultaneously. Hence we often speak of globalization as a matter of *compressing space and time*. So territorial distance and borders have

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limited significance; the globe becomes a single place in its own right. (McMaster Web site, 1998)

Our conversations about globalization and the pedagogical prospects of the gift began with the recognition of the ambiguous and alluring power that was released in our classroom conversations and work through the use of the Internet. Our beginning questions turned out to be deceptively simple: "Why do people put up all these great papers and links and sites seemingly for nothing?" "Why are all these people just giving away their stuff?" The three of us had been struck by the generosity of scholars, researchers, and amateurs in sharing freely the fruits of their labor on what appeared to be every imaginable topic.

Of course, such generous arrivals were not without risk, as what is transcended first and foremost with the onrush of Internet possibilities is the taken-for-grantedness of the warrant of what we receive in such gifts. As Hillman (1987) has suggested, "opportunities are not plain, clean gifts. They trail dark and chaotic attachments" (p. 123). They are thus inherently ambiguous and tricky: "reciprocity as rivalry, generosity as interested, the free return as obligatory" (Schrift, 1997, p. 9) always remains a series of open possibilities, as the economy of the gift "refuses to attend to egoistic and interested calculations of exchange while at the same time remaining aware of that very logic of exchange" (p. 14).

Therefore, the phrase *given away for nothing* has stayed with us, because it still rings of a proximity to commodified forms of exchange that have been somehow transcended, although it is not yet quite plain and clean what has arrived through such transcendence. Therefore, too, we have begun to read the movement from commodified relations toward the economy of the gift as a way of understanding the transcendence of boundaries characteristic of the phenomenon of globalization and how new classroom technologies might figure in such a phenomenon.

These beginning questions helped us to listen differently to the conversations in the classroom as one child or another would grab the whiteboard marker to insist on showing another, better way of thinking about a problem; as one or the other of them would follow university researchers around the classroom, arguing, for example, the fine points of distinction between human and natural structures. Again, similar questions arose: Why did they bother, these children, to argue with such energy and abandon in favor of their preferred solutions? Why did they care to be clear or controversial or interesting? What were they giving us in these exchanges?

Why don't they just *stop*?

And what of that experience of standing stock still among 50 grade school students and feeling the propulsive movement of one utterance on top of the other, with waves of dissent from this corner or that issued to each pronouncement? And even those pronouncements that were attempts to disrupt this movement with flip answers were often overwhelmed when their answers were taken seriously, were taken up, were sometimes read as more generous gifts than the giver may have intended or could have imagined alone. *How they were taken up*, then, moved them into the movement that underwrites a gift economy. "Gift" is thus not an objective property of something. Rather, "the

way we treat a thing can sometimes change its nature" (Hyde, 1983, p. xiii) from gift to commodity to gift and return.

We affirm this movement of the gift as essential to pedagogy and especially essential to understanding the place of new technologies and the moving, gifted "chaos of possibilities" (Hillman, 1987, p. 123) they can release into the work of pedagogy. These children—sometimes unwittingly, sometimes even unwillingly—were giving us something for nothing. And in engaging them in these conversations, it seems that we were doing the same, all of us now caught up in the play, caught up in the *Spiel* (Gadamer, 1989), caught up in the "circular movement" (Hyde, 1983, pp. 11-16) of something playing itself out all around us, something moving in wider and richer arcs than the commonplace boundaries and borders of seemly schooling often allow.

*The Language of Pedagogical Commodification and the Intransigence of its Boundaries*

Could we escape the limits of the ... ideal of autonomy—the nomos of the autos—as a law of the self, which might make it possible to exceed the limits of our selves and enter into the between of self and other without losing ourselves in the process? To free ourselves from the oppositional logic of "self vs. all others" might allow for our self-construction as something other than isolated and atomistic subjectivities. Freed from the constraints of an atomistic and autonomous individualism, might possibilities be opened for establishing non-proprietary relations ... in which a fully intersubjective self could be at home in the between of self and other? And might such ... relations facilitate the formulation of an alternative logic of the gift, one liberated from the presuppositions of more classic exchange logics that imprison gift giving within the constraints of the economic assumptions of commodity trading? (Schrift, 1997, p. 20)

*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.* Gadamer 1989, p. 295)

Much traditional educational research and classroom practice can be understood as operating within the borders and boundaries of the language of commodity-trading, and therefore within the language of a sort of atomistic individuality that cannot envisage any in-between other than distanced, monitored forms of anonymous, zero-sum exchange.

Such commodification of pedagogical relationships may be part of the deep malaise we as educators feel in our daily work and in our scholarly efforts to understand the logic we are living out. Images of commodification, their premises and their consequences, infest the classroom with the most intransigent of boundaries. In this imagining, the "to and fro motion" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 104) of the gift disappears and with it, we suggest, the very possibility of pedagogy.

Without the free and unselfconscious (Hyde, 1983) movement of the gift, education loses its abundance. It loses its love, not only of children, but also its love of how the worlds we are entrusted with (mathematics, language, etc.) are themselves great and ambiguous gifts, great movements into which we might step. Things become leaden. Things stop and take on the measured click of the machine, where "time is always running out" (Berry, 1987, p. 44) and where knowledge becomes scarce and there is never enough for everyone. Without

the movement of the gift, we live in our classrooms unable to be moved by or to feel the movement of the living disciplines of the world.

There are many faces to this mire of pedagogical commodification, both in educational theory and educational practices. It begins, first, with an image of "the individual" as separate and autonomous and, therefore, an image of interrelatedness as a matter of optional, discretionary, wilful, withholdable exchanges with other equally autonomous individuals. Thus education becomes full of a language of cross-border exchanges between teacher and student, between student and text, between consuming knowledge and reproducing it on tests, between the accumulating and hoarding of knowledge and the exchange of such knowledge for marks. Commodification marks the break-up of the living disciplines of the world into carefully packagable, dispensable, consumable, and manageable curriculum resources and such a break-up lends itself perfectly to talk of the marketability of skills and widespread images of accountability and monitoring. Knowledge begins to appear to be scarce, something hoarded by teachers and dispensed in developmentally graded increments. And this reproduces images of second and third worlds, of underdevelopedness, and of the desire of development as underwritten by the opening of new markets: a horrifying image of educating our children in order to open them up to being new markets for our own profit. Of course, we do this "for their own good" (Miller, 1989) because they too, *if they make the grade, if they measure up*, will become autonomous producers and consumers along with us, able, like us, to survive and profit.

Because the premise of these moves is what could be called a "metaphysics of self-containment" (and therefore subsequently containable exchanges between "individuals"), such exchanges must, of course, commodify the "worth" of those exchanges such that no self-contained individual loses out in the rounds of exchange. The space "in between" individuals thus becomes "the market" where exchanges occur.

Further to this, those exchanges that become most "valued" are those that allow such commodification. It is therefore interesting to note how our images of "the basics" in education are themselves produced out of this logic. It turns out that the basics are those elements that can be most easily packaged and delivered in discreet, sequenced, monitorable exchanges; they are also those elements the having of which can be most easily tested and assessed by having children give back to us what we have given them. They are also those elements that can and must be learned and understood "individually." There is no need for one child to converse with another about a "basic math fact" question on a test. In fact, this would be "cheating."

Another buried consequence of this logic is evident in how so much of the discourse of beginning teachers begins by revolving around issues of "management." If classrooms are ideally/ideologically constituted by the logic of containable exchanges, and teachers are those entrusted to monitor and facilitate such exchanges in ways fair to each "individual child," then how to manage this becomes paramount. Teachers become "good facilitators" of seemingly exchanges. Add to this another logic we are living out, and a great deal of classroom turbulence is laid out.

From our inheritance of late 19th-century pedagogies (Miller, 1989), children are understood to be the uncivilized, the wild, those who will without proper education wilfully attempt to despoil civil, commodifiable, and containable relations. Thus classroom management becomes even more central to our ability to imagine the contours of educational theory and practice. Worse yet, the much heralded arrival of constructivism becomes visible as a way to co-opt the wilderness/wildness of children by offering them a part in the dampening down of their own audacities, a part in their own "civilization," a part in their own self-containment: they now *produce* (and don't simply *consume*) knowledges that are already and ahead of time co-opted in the rounds of exchange that constitute schooling and school success. The invitation that constructivism thus offers children is one that keeps in place their diminishment, but now lures them into doing it to themselves. Perfect: children, as reflective-constructive participants in their own education, become self-monitoring, self-assessing, self-managing, self-containing.

And we end up in a weird and horrifying ecological backspin, calling wilderness forests "natural resources" and calling our children "our *greatest* natural resource."

In such an imaginal space, the idea of globalization gets collapsed into a happy gloss for the colonizing, "universalizing and homogenizing" (Grant, 1998, p. 1) imposition of *marketspeak* in all aspects of our lives. As Grant goes on to suggest in his reflections on the advent of our modern constructivism epistemologies, "Kant's dictum 'the mind makes the object' were the words of blessing spoken at the wedding of knowing and production, and should be remembered when we contemplate what is common throughout the world" (p. 1). As we have all experienced, the language of the market, the language of commodity and producing and consuming, has gained predominance as a warranted form of publicly speaking. And as educators we have all experienced how knowledge has become a commodity, students and parents have become "stakeholders" and customers, and teachers have become "accountable" in ways tethered at the outset to measurable achievements and their published, numerically rank-ordered results.

All else seems merely naïve, unable to understand "the realities" of things. And although it might seem naïve to suggest otherwise, this is not the sort of transcendence of boundaries that globalization can portend.

*The Language of the Gift and the Transcendence of Boundaries: Globalization as Working in the Economy of the Gift*

A brief entry in a mid-nineteenth-century collection of English fairy tales tells of a Devonshire man to whom the fairies had given an inexhaustible barrel of ale. Year after year the liquor ran freely. Then one day the man, curious to know the cause of this extraordinary power, removed the cork from the bung hole and looked into the cask; it was full of cobwebs. When the spigot next was turned, the ale ceased to flow.

The moral is this: the gift is lost in self-consciousness. To count, measure, reckon value, or seek the cause of a thing, is to step outside the circle, to cease being "all of a piece" with the flow of gifts and become, instead, one part of the whole reflecting upon another part. We participate in the esemplastic power of a gift by way of a particular kind of unconsciousness. (Hyde, 1983, pp. 151-152)

In some of our earlier work (Jardine, 1990, 1998), we have already explored some of the philosophical underpinnings of the image of the gift and its pedagogical character. We suggested that the idea of data or a datum is defined as that which is freely given and therefore, following Heidegger (1968) (in one of his wonderfully wild etymologies), *thinking* (*denken*) about the living realities of classroom events might best be described as a form of *thanks* (*danken*) of the gift of the given. This line of thought provided us with a wonderful way of thinking through Gadamer's (1989) idea of taking up what is freely given in a classroom conversation. He suggests that, rather than combating what has been offered up in argumentative ways in order to weaken it in favor of something else, one might rather attempt to strengthen it by taking it up, by taking seriously its claim on us, taking seriously its claim to be in some sense true of something. It should, that is, be taken up as a gift and read back perhaps more generously than the giver intended or knew or desired.

This is especially evident in one of the most telling passages in Gadamer's (1989) *Truth and Method* where he states that "it is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to 'understand' the text [what is written or said] as another's opinion" (p. 294). Understanding what children offer in a classroom conversation as their "opinion" might be intended well, but it is also understandable as a refusing of the gift that is offered by handing it back to them as belonging to them. It is refusing to let it lay claim to us, to address us, to obligate us by its arrival to enter into the movement of thinking it sets forth. It is, however much unwittingly, a reinvoking of the whole metaphysics of commodification where experience is something an individual *has* (think of all the rhetoric of ownership in educational discourse), and conversation is something where individuals simply enter into relations of exchange. Forcing the gift back into "another's opinion," although it is meant as a way of honoring each child, in fact reinforces a zero-sum game in which every utterance rests inert beside any and all others, each having lost its power of address, that is, its power to draw us into some larger, richer, more mysterious movements of ancestry and obligation than the narrows of owned-and-exchanged subjectivities. In fact, we begin to glimpse that "the focus on subjectivity [and its reliance on images of autonomous individuality] is a distorting mirror" (p. 276).

All of this came home to us when we began to think of our recent experiences in studying a version of Homer's *Odyssey* with a group of 50 grade 2 children. We had chosen the *Odyssey* deliberately as a tale we knew to be full of wondrous images, wondrous questions, wondrous topographies. We had taken several other groups of children into this place before. We knew, as Gadamer (1989) has noted, that "youth [in fact, anyone 'new' to something] demands images for its imagination and for the forming of its memory. [We must, therefore] supplement the *critica* of Cartesianism [i.e., methodological issues of how to teach children to read] with the old *topica*" (p. 21); imaginal topographies that involve issues of what is worthy of the imagination and involvement of teachers and children alike, where there is a rich, recursive, rigorous, interrelated (Doll 1993) place in which we might meet?

We did invite these children to read in a particular way that we also expected of ourselves. We enticed them to "give their hearts away," to find in

the tale the images, characters, words (the "good bits," as we and the children called them) that really spoke to each one of them and that were the opening or portal into what this tale might help us understand about ourselves and the great, mysterious arcs that tether us to this alluring place. Pairs of children carefully mapped out elaborate illustrations to different moments in the story that had for them a special hesitation. These pictures were sweated over for weeks, and the classroom became simply filled up with the images the children carefully, thoughtfully, diligently labored over. These pictures, with the appropriate retelling by each child, were posted on the school's Internet site. Part of the labor of understanding this tale, then, involved all of us giving away what each of us found in favor of wider, more generous, more worldly rounds of movement in which each of us was intimately involved.

Hyde (1983) mentions that a peculiar characteristic of the gift and its movement is that it always, so to speak, has to go around a corner, out of sight. The movement set in motion by the gift always just might return, like the unanticipated converses of a good conversation, drawing us out of ourselves into a movement greater than we could have experienced alone. The gift is always experienced as arriving from elsewhere, somewhere unexpected, undeserved, unearned. It is impossible to know in advance how it will be taken up, just as Homer himself could not have imagined that these children, here, in these times, would give their hearts away like this.

Three years after the grade 2 children completed their work, the following (excerpted) letter arrived at the School Division office and was eventually directed to us and, through us, to the children and parents involved:

*I am a Professor of Nuclear Engineering, Purdue University, and write to you from Athens, Greece where I am spending the current semester.*

*I have translated the first rhapsody of Homer's Odyssey into modern Greek and am in the process of publishing it in Greece. This translation differs from others in the sense that I use all the words of Homer that are still in use today although the modern Greek reader might have difficulty in recognizing some of them as they have changed over time and only the root of the word remains. These words (more than forty percent of the original dates to circa 800 BC), are printed in the old and modern Greek in red.*

*For some time I have been in search of an appropriate cover for my translation. It was my good luck to find via the Internet the beautiful drawings of the Grade Two class of [your] school as they retell the Odyssey in words and pictures.*

*I am considering using one of the following two:*

*Calypso's Cave by A. and A.*

*Odysseus Escapes by M. and M.*

*Will you please grant me the appropriate permission to do so? Looking forward to your reply.*

*Sincerely, (signed) (name withheld), Professor Emeritus  
Purdue University, West Lafayette IN.*

Teachers, children, and parents alike experienced the vertigo rush in this wonderful, unexpected arrival. Because the children had accepted the gift-movement of Homer's work, their pictures that were themselves given away set in motion a cascade of transcendences: between school work and the work of the world; between children's work and the work of adults; between the

work of careful illustration and the ebullience of the playful pleasures of real work; between teachers and learners; between the cultural boundaries of Canada and a former American scholar now in contemporary Greece; between "Ancient Greece" as a mandated curriculum demand and "Ancient Greece" as a living place inhabited by children's and teachers' imaginations; and, from the professor's letter, between ancient and contemporary Greek words and the fact that his translation is premised precisely on long-forgotten rootednesses of contemporary terms and their origins. So his reading of the *Odyssey* in this way is itself in part a releasing of the gift-movement of contemporary usage back into its living inheritance.

The image of the gift helped us glimpse something we had taken for granted in this work and the rounds it seemed to take. We found that we had been deliberately taking up those things entrusted to us as teachers of young children as living gifts, living inheritances, rather than as commodifiable, inert, exchangeable objects. We had been acting on the belief that, for example, the tales and images of Ancient Greece are not simply deadened curriculum mandates that have to be somehow "covered." Rather, they "possess [their] own original worldliness and thus the centre of its [their] own Being so long as [they are] not placed in the object-world of producing and marketing. Our orientation to [such things, unlike our orientation to the object-world] is always something like our orientation to an inheritance" (Gadamer, 1994, pp. 191-192). We choose it, therefore, not because it is some sort of "great book" but because it is *already on the move* in our culture, in the imaginations of children, in our images of journeys, in tales told and monsters imagined, in ideas of travel and home and family and fates and return. We had been reading a version of Homer's *Odyssey* with a group of grade 2 children with an eye to its movement in our lives as a gift, as an arrival, not, then, with an eye to what we might get from it, but with an eye to how we might give ourselves to it and, in such giving of our attention and love, keeping in motion its character as a gift.

Commodification stops the movement. It stops things from being "moving" and makes us believe that "being moved" is just emotional, just subjective, just idiosyncratic and personal, and therefore dismissable in light of more cynical, more "realistic" insights. This relationship between the movement and the stopping has always been a topic for us with the children and student teachers we engage. What is becoming clear is that questions of how to motivate children have disappeared in favor of questions of how to find what is moving, how to find the movement, the living generosity of the subjects we teach. We are finding that *this living movement is what defines for us the idea of what is "basic" to any discipline with which we have been entrusted*. Therefore, unless we enter wholeheartedly into the movement of thinking that it offers and demands of us, what we teach and learn remains anonymous and dead and takes on all the deadliness of school-as-consumption-and-production.

"The way we treat a thing can sometimes change its nature" (Hyde, 1983, p. xiii).

The conversations that interest us, both as teachers and as researchers, are not part of this zero-sum game of monitored dispensation. The conversations that interest us and that take our breath away are purely and clearly excessive.



We are suggesting that what is "basic" to any of the work we do in education is *precisely in such excessiveness*.

What is basic is the abundance, the gift in what we teach.

#### *Postscript*

Back at this tail end to our fascination with the gift-character of the Internet: We cannot avoid the fact that in all this excessiveness, other, more silent borders are heightened in such a way that *their* transcendence becomes even less likely than before. As Ivan Illich reminds us, "every technological response to a deeply human need creates a new level of poverty." Every gift can also sometimes subtly, sometimes grossly and intentionally diminish those outside the circles of its movement.

We know that we have come upon "something else" (Godbout with Caille, 1998, p. 3) here and we understand the terrible dangers of treating such matters naïvely, as if the political and economic forces at work in the new globalization were all somehow either nonexistent or beneficent.

Without a careful critique of commodification, globalization turns out to be nothing more than the new colonialism. But without imagining "something else" than such commodification, such a critique is ripe and ready for the sort of cynicism, paranoia, and exhaustion that as teachers we cannot readily afford.

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