What's the Deal with Learning? Embracing Awkwardness as a Superpower

Morgan Anderson
University of Northern Iowa

The contemporary educational landscape has become as absurd as it is unbearable. The learning society exerts its insatiable demands on us: clearer objectives, more standardized assessments, less ambiguity. Whatever academic freedom we have left is quickly becoming suffocated under a near-constant demand to produce artifacts of student learning aligned to prescribed outcomes.

In the learning society, learning presents itself as a constant injunction: all of our efforts must be in service of learning. This fetishization of learning erodes our capacity—maybe even our desire—to linger, or to dwell. It undermines our ability to *not* act, which as Gert Biesta explains, is constitutive of freedom.[1] It certainly renders Jenny Odell's challenge to "do nothing" almost unthinkable.[2] As Biesta puts the point, with this myopic focus on learning, "there is very little explicit discussion…about what constitutes *good* education."[3]

In other words, to question the centrality of learning in an educational context would be to assume the position of the Larry David-type character that Adam Kotsko utilizes to celebrate "an awkwardness so joyously awkward that it becomes its own kind of grace."[4] Imagine asking something along the lines of "So, what's the deal with learning?" in the classic Seinfeld-David-esque delivery during an all college meeting.

But, as Tyson Lewis explains, it might be just this sort of awkwardness that cracks open a space of possibility for alternative modes of being, teaching, and relating. Specifically, Lewis challenges the dominant orientation towards mistakes in "progressive educational circles" where there is an assumption that mistakes "must be made operative, made functional for promoting development of the learner."[5] I find this analysis of mistakes and their "awkward potentiality" to be refreshing, provocative, and a salve for the soul of the philosophers of education who find themselves perpetually gaslit by the regime of the learning society. If we attempt to push the boundaries of our craft in *any* way (e.g.

"grading" schemas) we find ourselves in a perpetual state of awkwardness; we are asking questions that are unintelligible to the *logos* of the system we must operate under.

I will focus on two points of tension that arose for me in Lewis' essay: first, the relationship between awkwardness and the mistake; second, the issue of power.

My first question is: Do we need to assume that all mistakes are inherently awkward for this argument to be helpful? There seem to be examples of awkwardness that I would hesitate to classify as a mistake, as well as mistakes that don't seem to be particularly awkward. The student who belches loudly during a lecture has created an awkward moment, perhaps, but it's not clear they've made a mistake. Similarly, the student that blurted out during a class discussion, "So, is our governor in bed with the Pope?" as we were discussing the implications of Education Savings Accounts in Iowa that permit families to use tax dollars to send their children to private, religious schools, created a fleeting moment of awkwardness, but again, I would not say they made a mistake; to the contrary, this enthusiastic engagement with ideas is just the sort of thing I'm after. And, if we take Lewis' argument seriously, there is a risk in even classifying this example as awkward because, as he explains, it "lets off the hook the social order itself. When awkwardness is projected onto an individual coworker or student, focus shifts away from the social laws as *producing* or *inducing* awkwardness." In other words, classroom norms, which *even implicitly* discourage this sort of candor, are not neutral.

On the flip side, a student that misunderstands the parameters of an assignment and submits work that is too far outside the bounds of the brief for the instructor to justify deeming the assignment "complete," has made a mistake, but it's not obvious that this is itself awkward. As Lewis explains, it is not simply a "wrong-ward" turn that generates awkwardness; a shared mood must accompany it. We can imagine an instructor or student *making* this mistake awkward, but it does not seem inherently so. To be clear, I am persuaded that attempts to reincorporate both mistakes and awkwardness back into the social order risk robbing both of their joyous potential. However, I think there is more

to flesh out regarding the relationship between the two.

My second point relates to power. There is no shortage of examples of either the inequitable consequences meted out on mistake-makers or the privileges associated with having one's missteps be categorized as mistakes. Examples in educational settings are equally abundant, as is the harmful *logos* of the learning society that justifies consequences for these actions through the lens of "learning a lesson," or "disruptions to learning," despite a dearth of evidence to suggest that harsh disciplinary practices teach such lessons at all. Empirical research clearly demonstrates that low-income children, children of color, children with disabilities, etc. are simply not afforded the same opportunities to make mistakes, or to have their actions be considered mere mistakes at all. I think Lewis' argument, if applied to this problem, provides us with liberatory insights. However, this would require that we devote more philosophical energy to unpacking commonsense wisdom around the nature of mistakes, their relationship to awkwardness, and our orientations around the regime of learning, in addition to deeply embedded cultural biases that shape our interpretations of others' actions.

As Lewis puts it, his project is aimed at "neutralizing the *telos* of learning," by providing both mistakes and awkwardness as entry points for shining a spotlight on the instrumental logic that has fully engulfed education. I think the *telos* of "preparation" is a distinct, but attendant logic that exerts comparable power over us; discourses of preparation for "the real world" to justify oppressive educational practices is similarly intractable and is, frankly, an embarrassing proposition given the state of the real world. As Gert Biesta puts the point, "[t]he first question that needs to be asked in any situation is whether the particular circumstances are worth adapting to, or whether there is a need to resist and refuse adaptation."[6] To the contrary, it is urgent that we encourage the cultivation of subjectivities that are maladapted to the world as it is if we are to have any hope at solving the litany of perils we face, including the existential threat of climate change. Though, this too, perhaps makes the mistake of subsuming education under instrumental logics; though, this would at least be an aim that I would endorse. Additionally, we would need to take care

to not give into the temptation to submit our newfound perspective on mistakes and awkwardness to such reasoning; one can almost hear the learning outcome associated with the inoperative potentiality of mistakes being written. Instead, as Kotsko explains, "we can practice the skill of awkward improvisation, of identifying those situations most fruitful for intervention, of feeling out the shape and rhythm of consciously-chosen redoubled awkwardness."[7]

Nonetheless, such considerations reveal the liberatory potential of Lewis' argument. In troubling the *logos* of the learning economy we create a powerful form of awkwardness—perhaps even a "radical awkwardness"—as we explore questions that our system has no answer to. For example, after sitting with this paper, I have in recent weeks been more attuned to other ways we submit awkwardness to instrumental logic. In particular, the "awkward silence" that is created by "wait time" is often framed as valuable because it gives students additional time to consider ideas at hand and make a meaningful contribution or create a situation so unbearable that someone is compelled to come up with something to say, which gives the awkwardness its "value." This may have its place, but we need not think of silence this way. As Jesse Ball explains, students might just be "wandering the corridors of the mind that are elsewhere inaccessible."[8]

In this way, as philosophers of education, awkwardness might be our superpower. The questions we pose and orientations we have render us uniquely equipped to create those unbearably awkward moments, which shine a light on taken-for-granted assumptions and can open up new possibilities for being and relating.

REFERENCES

1 Gert Biesta, *World-Centered Education: A View for the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 54. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003098331

2 Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (London: Melville House Publishing, 2019).

3 Gert Biesta, "Good Education in an Era of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect With the Question of Purpose in Education," *Educational*

Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability 21, no. 1 (2009): 36. https://doi.
org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9

4 Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness: An Essay.* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books,
2010), 89.

5 Tyson Lewis, "The Educational Relevance of the Awkwardness of Mis-
takes," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 3 (same issue).

6 Gert Biesta, *World-Centered Education: A View for the Present* (New York:
Routledge, 2022), 11. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003098331

7 Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness: An Essay* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010),
89.

8 Jesse Ball, *Notes on My Dunce Cap* (Brooklyn, NY: Pioneer Works Press,
2015), 123.