

The Dead End is a Starting Point: Teaching, Meaning-Making, and the Freedom to Experience

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I would like to begin by remarking on the unusual opportunity to continue a philosophical conversation that has taken place over a number of years. The essay that I am responding to is essentially a response to another essay, one that I helped write a few years ago. As much as I have tried to consider the author's essay on its own, I cannot help but refer to the original essay, "Can the Taught Book Speak?" delivered at the 2012 Philosophy of Education Society conference. The argument in that essay was contextualized in a conversation about teaching books that are banned in schools or in society versus teaching books that are freely available. My coauthors and I tried to work out whether the act of teaching any books renders them effectively unfree, regardless of their actual status. We argued that books, by their nature, are self-contained and available to be read by anyone at all, without requiring pedagogical intervention. In the course of this discussion, we pointed to the non-neutral act of teaching and to the power relations always present in educational relationships. Through this response, I will expand on the themes of the possibility of speech and the impossibility of teaching books, since the new essay takes them up, as well as reconsider some of the possibilities arising from the philosophical arguments we made at that time.

In the original essay, there are three main factors to consider. First, there is all that is involved in teaching — all of the invisible and visible relational acts, including selecting and assigning material, offering background information and context, asking questions, and, finally, evaluating a student's learning. There is, secondly, all that is involved in the "bookness" of a book. As a textual object, a book may be a work of art, or in the case of a textbook, by definition, educational. The author mentions two main types of books, literature and nonfiction, with the essay's argument centred largely on literature. Lastly, there is all that is involved in speaking. Speaking is more than making vocal noise — meaning is implied. When something *speaks to us*, it resonates. When something *is spoken for*, it is owned. When we *speak on behalf of*, we may be advocating (for example, in the case of teacher-as-megaphone), but, as I will argue, in the process, we diminish the possibility for the thing to speak for itself.

SPEAKING OF POWER

Towards the beginning of the essay, the author delivers a drive-by objection to our reliance on postmodern discourse. If by "postmodern discourse" the author means an analysis of power relations, such as that concerned with challenging institutionalized forms of power through a critique of micropolitics,¹ or adherence to a certain skepticism,² then, yes, we do — unabashedly. Teaching books (indeed any teaching) *is* an issue of power because teaching itself is complicit in a system that leverages power to dominate certain groups — youth, poor, racialized, and so on — by replicating that system on so many levels. However, rather than seek jus-

tice by allocating rules — “thou shalt not teach” — we meant to press pause and to dis-order some very ingrained assumptions in order to see what we do more clearly.

Taking up what he or she considers a missing element from the original essay, the author elaborates what it might mean to say that a book speaks. The author proceeds through a range of ways that books speak and settle on an understanding that privileges the role of the reader in experiencing and making sense of a book. Books speak through affect, making us feel something, as well as through content, giving us information. As the author concludes, books *persuade* us. Simply by being books, and by being read, books speak, and we can learn things from reading them — about ourselves, the world, or whatever. The author advocates literary theory that emphasizes interpretive acts by the reader. I agree with this understanding of reading. But if, as the author argues with help of literary theorists such as Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, and Paul Dias, reading is a unique event, dependent on the unique mix of contexts in which we are always already embedded, how do we then account for the institutionalized classroom experience? What do we do about evaluating students’ learning? How do we ensure that the reader-students’ unique experience is allowed to happen? Our essay was concerned with the dynamic that occurs when you throw a teacher — an intermediary — into the already synergistic mix of reader and text.

As teachers, we try to support students in creating meaning by presenting scenarios so that they might resonate with some of the range of human experience without having to actually experience those things. We do that (I think) too much, at the cost of allowing, let alone encouraging, students to experience what is happening for/to them. The one tends to happen at the expense of the other. The author argues that students *need* the social context of a text in order to make appropriate sense of it. However, the problem with arguing for narrated, supplied context as an imperative is that, per Fish, the real and immediate context is emergent and includes a dynamic interaction between a vast range of elements. A consequent separation of experience, on the one hand, and content of study, on the other, is alienating and at the basis of what Freire called “narration sickness.”³ Students are denied the opportunity to produce knowledge and to have their lived experience represented in the meaning-making project that is reading. The subjectivity of the reader, considered omnipresent in any reading, is the very thing that teaching a book takes away.

Of course, there are many ways to teach. In his response to the original essay, Paul Standish suggested that teachers might be thought of as guides,⁴ the way docents point things out to people at art galleries. Standish assures us that teaching need not equate to explication and suggests that humility and restraint allow good teaching to happen. But even in this best case scenario, there seems to be a disconnect between literary theory that privileges the reader and her experience and the practice of teaching in schools.

Let’s create an idyllic image of a student-reader, with all of her projections, activities, life experience, and emotional tendencies, interacting dynamically with a text, and developing meaning (let’s put this reader in a cozy corner just to complete the picture). The book is speaking to the reader, and she is having an experience. Let’s

add a teacher — the best kind of teacher, the kind presented in the author’s anecdotes: funny, engaging, passionate, extremely knowledgeable, but with a humility and the understanding that students can and should be allowed and encouraged to have a unique event and interpretation. However, take this teacher on an impatient day or under the pressure to demonstrate “results.” He tells the student how expert consensus interprets the meaning of a yellow rose, for example, and suddenly the student’s own interpretation, whether intellectual, affective, or visceral, is now wrong, or at best partial. The teacher’s reading trumps the student’s because, inherently, the relation of teacher to student is not neutral; it is a power relation. Regardless of the teacher’s expertise, students need to have access to their own voice; the issue becomes whether or not the student can speak for herself. Rather than narrating context, I would argue that teachers should recognize and amplify the student-reader’s own “expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions.”⁵ Teachers need to guard against the fallacy that they are merely teaching content or simply allowing students to make their own interpretations. The authority inherent in teaching negates any neutrality at the outset, yet teachers tend to lapse into this charade.

APPROACHING TEACHING AS A DEAD END

Text solidifies meaning. Think of the expression “written in stone.” Written words “maintain an aloof silence.” This was Plato’s beef. With written text we can “speak back” only to each other, not the author, and this is why I do think it is so important to study books together — we create meaning through dialogue. However, maybe Plato didn’t anticipate the shift that happened to accommodate the ubiquity of written text, namely that teachers now teach books, effectively parenting them on behalf of the constructed author. Dialogue has become secondary, and we are the poorer for it. If written text is dulled down to the point of silence, then, on the one hand, teachers may be needed to infuse life into dead stories. But, on the other hand, teachers may just as easily drown out the book’s (already quiet) voice, replacing the book’s voice with their own.

In concluding, I want to explicitly address the dreaded “dead end,” where we throw up our hands and say, well, we can’t teach. The author has identified this as the most troubling conclusion of the original essay, yet I still hold this to be a useful (if not practical) conclusion. Maybe it is teaching that is dead, or maybe just teaching as we know it. In the original essay, we introduced a tongue-in-cheek metaphysical teacher, who literally cannot allow a book to *be*. We also provided one central example of an educational situation where a teacher *does* allow a book to speak, that of Joseph Jacotot, the Ignorant Schoolmaster. There are other examples of nontaught educational experiences: We can think of Sugata Mitra and the hole-in-the-wall experiment, where young people, presented with a computer secured in a public location, taught themselves not only the mechanisms needed to make the computer do things but also the language required to navigate the programs.⁶ We can also point to the trend of flipped classrooms where students can explore content on their own before participating in the collective, authoritative classroom experience, and numerous studies that suggest that leaving students alone to choose their reading materials helps them to develop lifelong habits of reading.⁶

Once you are teaching a book, you are rendering it not a book, which was a conclusion of “Can the Taught Book Speak?” The taught book is simultaneously transformed into something different by the act of teaching it. The meaning is no longer only fixed through the text; the teacher is undoing that solidity or, perhaps, layering on more cement. Not only is the author’s intent prescribed, but now the teacher also adds a layer. I’m committed to maintaining this cynical view of schooling. We need this in order that we don’t become aloof narrators of a dominant cultural story. If we remain blind to the ways that the “simple” act of teaching a text is complicit in power relations, we too are perpetuating hegemonic dominance. Our tongue-in-cheek provocation was meant to wake us up to consider the ways that our “benevolent guidance” (the best version of teaching) is also complicit. My coauthors and I are teachers, too. We don’t think our job is literally impossible. However, we do know that it is literally impossible to be neutral, to be a purely positive influence, or to allow our students to escape unscathed. Let’s assume that the taught book cannot speak and see what voices arise from that silence. What do unbanned, unchained books say to each of us, with our diverse and unique experiences? What can we learn as a result?

1. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, (London: MacMillan, 1991), 5.

2. *Ibid.*, 9.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin, 1996), 52.

4. Paul Standish, “What Is It to Teach a Book?,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013).

5. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2–3, quoted in Gordon, “On Teaching Books,” n. 13.

6. Sugata Mitra, “Build a School in the Cloud,” *TED*, February 2013, 22:31, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_build_a_school_in_the_cloud/transcript?language=en

7. See, for example, Denise N. Morgan and Christopher W. Wagner “What’s the Catch?”: Providing Choice in a High School Classroom,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 56, no. 8 (May 2013): 659–667 and Linda B. Gambrell, “Seven Rules of Engagement: What’s Most Important to Know About Motivation to Read,” *Reading Teacher* 65, no. 3 (Nov 2011): 172–178.