On Boundary Conditions in Education: Response to Richardson

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In "Educational Borderlands: Rigidities, Transparencies, and Porosities," Michael Richardson urges us to pay more attention to boundaries in education. His point of departure is the observation that (Western) education is torn between the aims of socializing and individualizing.[1] Richardson diagnoses this dichotomy as a symptom of a deeper ontological disorder, the tendency to consider individual entities (persons, groups, ideas, things) as either the building blocks or the derivatives of social and natural systems. By contrast, Richardson wants us to accord ontological primacy to the boundaries between entities, suggesting that it is here where we perceive the simultaneous revelation and interdependent nature of both entities and relationships.[2] For example, it makes no sense to speak of a conflict between Israel and Palestine if there is no Israel and no Palestine; conversely, both states are defined by their conflict. To help us focus in on the interplay of entities and relationships at the boundary, Richardson adumbrates the three variable qualities of boundaries that form his subtitle. As boundaries shift or harden, as influence ebbs and flows, and as windows open and close, so does our understanding of *what* is interacting and *how*.

Despite its brevity, this is a very ambitious essay. The aim is not merely to overcome Egan's dichotomy, but to return education to its epistemological and moral sources. When we work the boundaries, Richardson suggests, we are getting closer to the source of things, to primary phenomena. He offers the example of light and shadow. Any study of these as separate will be attenuated; for a fuller understanding we must investigate their interactions and interdependence at their "shared boundary." While Richardson is somewhat elliptical about the moral import of refocusing on boundaries, I take his point to be that the ethics of teaching demands awareness and negotiation of these three liminal variables as follows:

Rigidity. A teacher and student meet at what is both a personal boundary and a role boundary. An overly rigid personal boundary is an ethical loss, a disavowal of the fact that each is caught up in the life of the other; an overly malleable personal boundary leads to the ethical violation of treating the other like an extension of yourself. The doctrine of the mean also applies to role boundaries. As the teacher-student relationship is predicated on growth, it should be evolving. Without some renegotiation of roles, the relationship arrests. Conversely, if there is too little integrity to role boundaries, the relationship dissolves.

Transparency. Without some degree of transparency, students and teachers must resort to guesswork. Students are wondering what the teacher thinks of them or wants from them. Or they may be trying to perceive the teacher's relation to the material: Does my teacher really care about this? If so, why? If not, why should I? Meanwhile, teachers are wrestling with their own set of questions: What do my students know, need, love, fear? What is going on with this student? How did that lesson go over? Given the importance and inevitability of such questions, I do not know whether to describe an opaque teacher-student relationship as dystopian or commonplace. Perhaps both.

Porosity. Richardson brings out the importance of porosity in teaching in two ways. The first is a variation on the transparency point. Porosity allows a more direct awareness of the other. I need not peer over into his or her world: I can sense its contours as they bump up against my own. Second, and more fundamentally, if there is no porosity there is no influence and thus nothing is taught.[3]

There is obvious intuitive appeal to this idea that greater attention to such boundary conditions would safeguard and enrich education. However, Richardson's thesis is grander than this. He posits this liminal knowing,

or "recognition" as he calls it, as the very aim of education. Inspired by the etymology of the word, Richardson suggests that education aims at "knowing together again." I take the "again" part of this formulation simply to refer to the fact that we tend to drift from *kennen* (*conocer*, *connaitre*) into *wissen* (*saber*, *savoir*), to lapse from "I-You" to "I-It."[4] Thus, we experience knowing together as a return.

Where things get more complicated is in understanding precisely what Richardson means by knowing *together*. Here are three possible theoretical variants:

> *1. Buberian.* The knower recognizes an entity, for example, a tree. This is "knowing together" because the knower adopts an I-You stance toward the tree. The knowledge is not distantiated, controlling, propositional "knowledge about," but knowledge as kinship. The knower feels addressed by the tree. On this variant, the teacher would play only a facilitative role, with the *dramatis personae* being the student and tree.
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> *2. Hegelian.* According to intersubjectivity theory, self-knowledge and knowledge of the other are dialectically intertwined.[5] My sense of who I am depends on the recognition of significant others whose distinctive significance (significant distinctness) depends on my recognition of them. On this variant, the *dramatis personae* are teacher and student, working out the dynamics of mutual recognition.
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> *3. Gadamerian.* For Gadamer, understanding is an activity requiring three "participants," the knower, an interlocutor, and the subject matter. The truth of the subject emerges precisely in the space opened up by the friction between the views of the interlocutors, for example teacher and student.

It is hard to square any of these variants with Richardson's own characterizations. Because he speaks of recognition occurring "between teacher and student," I think we can safely rule out the Buberian variant. However, the Hegelian variant doesn't seem right either, for the interperson-

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al seems to be just one aspect of what Richardson is after. In many of his examples there is a non-human object of knowledge. Some of the ambiguity arises from an equivocation between two formulations, knowledge *of* and knowledge *at* the boundaries. Thus, Richardson speaks of "recognition *of* (knowing together again) such boundaries between self and other, between student and teacher, between this concept and that, this operation or that, this ideology and that."[6] This suggests a dyadic model along the lines of Buber or Hegel. There is the knower and the known, regardless of whether the known is a person or a non-human entity. However, Richardson puts the matter a little differently when he describes,

> …[A] joint recognition between students and teachers at the boundaries that shape such things as concepts, operations (mental, emotional, or physical), disciplines, communities, states, and interpersonal relations—including those between teachers and students.

Here, again, the object might be the boundary between teacher and student or that between math and music or democrats and republicans. However, either way, something is occurring that Richardson describes as a joint recognition between students and teachers. Whether it is Gadamer's account or some other, much more needs to be said about the relation of these two processes. Why is it important that teachers and students know together these seams where entities come together? Is Richardson arguing that only when teachers and students engage in interpersonal boundary work will they successfully tune into the boundaries that give birth to entities and relations? Is he saying that when knowers tune into this ontological primacy (whether at the boundary between Israel and Palestine, addition and subtraction, or teacher and student), this brings them together?

Because these are murky waters, greater clarity is needed. And, of course, an essay this short on a topic this large can be at best a modest beginning. We will be interested to see how Richardson develops these concepts further. In the meantime, we are grateful to him for redirecting our attention to the boundaries between things, to the lines that simultaneously separate, mix, and connect.

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1 On this point, Richardson cites Egan. However, given Egan's view that education is torn between three conflicting ideals (adding "the academic ideal" to "socialization"

and "individual development"), Rorty's treatment of this issue might be more apt. See Kieran Egan, *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), chap. 2; Richard Rorty, "Education as Socialization and as Individualization," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

2 Without much more engagement with literatures in ontology, epistemology, recognition theory, and liminality, it is impossible to say whether this essay marks an advance. Is this a contribution to "relational ontology?" Or would Richardson find that same fault in Whitehead that he finds in systems theory, that it subordinates entities to relations? The reference to Andrew Benjamin's book (endnote 13) is ambiguous. The references to social epistemology are similarly perfunctory. One also wonders how Richardson would situate his position in relation to major thinkers on dialogue and recognition that I discuss below. While Richardson notes Sharon Todd's essay (endnote 5), Richardson neglects other interesting discussions of liminality in education from Freire's classic exploration of "limit conditions" to Jim Conroy's work on the "Liminal Imagination." See James C. Conroy, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Imagination, Education and Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); and, e.g., Tim McDonough, "Initiation, Not Indoctrination: Confronting the Grotesque in Cultural Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 7 (2011).

3 It might be interesting to consider how Dewey's dictum, "We never educate directly, only indirectly by means of the environment," might alter this conclusion. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916), 19.

4 On the mistranslation of Buber's *Ich und Du* as "I and Thou," see Walter Kaufmann, "I and You: A Prologue," in Martin Buber, *I and You*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Touchstone ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 7-48, 14ff. For variations of non-dialogical relationships beyond, I-It, see pp. 9-14.

5 We can trace several overlapping strands of this Hegelian tradition: through Mead and Habermas to Axel Honneth; through Freud and Winnicott to Jessica Benjamin; through Sartre and Fanon to Toni Morrison.

6 Emphasis mine.

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