

Who Is the Teacher? Testimony, Uniqueness, and Responsibility

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Lorraine Code's essay is a richly textured project of transforming the epistemology that informs western thought and practice. I am not going to offer a standard critique, for I agree with too much of her essay to offer substantive criticism. Neither am I going to merely apply Code's theory, a duality that she herself calls into question. Instead, I am going to *think with* some of her ideas in a particular epistemic location, the teacher. Thinking with, a phrase I learned from Gert Biesta, is a process of resituating, perhaps transforming, and likely transgressing. I thus am tempted to ask for forgiveness in advance.

Code introduces the idea of testimony into the epistemological landscape. Her interesting example is Madeleine Bunting's narrative about women in rural Uganda. Code concludes that in situations like this, "testimony is the main source of knowledge" because "few people...can go to see for themselves." Structurally, testimony involves an "informant," where the one-who-gives-testimony is in a second-person position (a *you*), testifying to someone in a first-person position (an *I* or *me*), about something or someone in a third-person position (a *they* or *she* or *it*). In short, testimony is an epistemic relation between an *I* and a *you* rather than between people described from a spectator position. Code points out that the idea of testimony shifts the epistemic relation towards the language of "speakers and hearers" and an "interactive, addressive, and responsive mode," highlighting the relationality of the "epistemic exchanges." From the perspective of the hearer, testimony involves trusting the *person* who testifies — where trusting the *who* frames accepting the *what* of the testimony's content, a kind of risk by the hearer precisely because he cannot go see for himself. As a result, Code asserts, it matters "*who* the 'other person' is" in the exchange, for there is an unavoidable, "certain particularity" of the other in the relation. By particularity she means, in part at least, the situatedness and details that make the person who she is, different from others.

I would like to frame the student–teacher relationship this way. From the first-person perspective of a student, structurally, a teacher occupies a second-person position, a *you*, interpreted as the one-who-gives-testimony, and the student is the hearer, an *I* or *me* in the relation, hearing about some *they* or *it*. In short, testimony in the classroom is an epistemic relation between an *I* and a *you* rather than between teacher and student described from a third-person spectator position. Further, testimony requires trusting the *person* who testifies, for a student is not in a position to judge independently about the testimony's content. As a result, there is an unavoidable particularity of the teacher in the relation, including her situatedness and other details that make her that person. So, it matters *who* the teacher is.

It may be of little surprise that society's, and thus students', understanding of teachers is deeply intertwined with what Code calls the "instituted social

imaginary.”¹ Even before entering the classroom, teachers are standardized by “highly bureaucratized” categories into which they are fit. For example, the instituted imaginary informs teacher certification, framing teachers to be more or less interchangeable as rational subjects, neutral bearers of universal knowledge. Moreover, there is increasingly loud talk about measuring them individually by Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), where individual teachers are assumed to be able to effect standardized, measurable progress in each student, irrespective of circumstance or difference, a view of teachers “where individual self-reliance is an overarching virtue.” As epistemic locations, teachers in effect are portrayed as “isolated units on an indifferent landscape” in which rich, ethical relations with students are incidental, precisely because knowledge is thought to be transferred, as objective information, in a “neatly manageable array of kinds.” Teaching is envisioned through the “imaginary of mastery and control” in which teachers have the power to ensure successful learning. The instituted imaginary encourages students and society to view teachers as universal, interchangeable rational atoms, measurable against an impersonal standard, including guaranteed results. This means not only that individual differences among teachers are seen as deviations from the standard, but also that these differences are best interpreted as blameworthy deficits. The instituted social imaginary makes understanding the particularities of teachers problematic. More strongly, the question of “who” has by and large disappeared into the objectified “what” of third-person categorizations, encouraging students and society to lose sight of the question, *who* is the teacher?²

The word “who” points to the *person*, in her particularities, rather than to an interchangeable bearer of universal knowledge. To allow the *person* of the teacher to emerge requires acknowledging her particularity. This is, Code would argue, manifest in part through the situated specificity of the one who gives testimony. To acknowledge this, as a hearer, requires the student to have a respectful, positive, ethical relationship with *this* teacher, *here, now*. It requires a relation of trust by the student to *this* particular teacher as a *person*.³ But on what is this trust built? How might such respect develop in the context of particularities? Is the trust and respect involved a function of the situatedness and specificities that comprise the teacher’s particularity? Would positive valorization of those situated specificities be enough to be manifest as respect in the relationship?

I am not totally convinced that valorization of particularity can alone get us to the “respectful cohabitation” and trust required for testimony. Early in her essay, Code introduces the notion of *uniqueness*, which she (through Adriana Cavarero) puts as “unrepeatable singularity,” something that “distinguishes each one from every other.” The term “uniqueness” here is ambiguous, for it can mean two different things. On the one hand, it can indicate something as markedly *different*, that which distinguishes someone from an other person to which she is comparable. Particularity, portrayed as situated specificities, might be marked as such differences. On this reading, it is because this teacher is *different* from any other that she is unique. Here uniqueness is a function of comparable *properties* of a person, including concrete situational specificities and circumstances. On the other hand, uniqueness here

could also indicate something as *irreplaceable*, which I am taking as a value beyond similarity or difference.⁴ The phrase “unrepeatable singularity” could indicate such irreplaceability. For example, a loved one is an unrepeatable singularity precisely because she is valued as irreplaceable even if, say, she might have great similarities to her identical twin — the loved one is unique. On this construal, it is the *relation* to the other person that makes her unique, without regard to differences with others. Thus, we could also say that a teacher is an unrepeatable singularity because she is irreplaceable in the relationship, and therefore she is unique.

This gets heightened when we understand that, unlike the connection between rational subjects, the positions of listener and speaker are not interchangeable. The speaker addresses the listener from a second-person position, as a *you* that addresses a *me*. Listening itself is a relation to the other person as irreplaceable.⁵ But within this asymmetry, irreplaceability indicates something more — an *ethical* relation. Irreplaceability pushes the particularity of the second-person position outside of any categorization while simultaneously enhancing its positive relational aspect. Instead of “disengaged indifference,” it is a relation of engaged non-indifference. Irreplaceability marks the other as of *worth*, a kind of dignity of the unique, outside of instantiating any kind, something that is a function of the relation of non-indifference of the hearer to the speaker. Listening is *welcoming* the other person, ethically receiving the speaker.⁶ Testimony, we could say, is possible because the one who testifies, the teacher, is unique for the hearer, the student. This feature highlights the respectfulness of “respectful cohabitation” via the asymmetrical ethical character of the relation between the one who gives the testimony and the one hearing it.

Testimony’s particular authority might well have to do with this asymmetry. Listening is an ethical relation that involves a *gap* between hearer and speaker, between the teacher’s testimony and the student’s ability to judge. Thus listening involves welcoming the one who addresses, thereby welcoming disruptions of previous epistemic certainty. The one who speaks puts the student, as a *me*, into question.⁷ The teacher’s testimony unsettles the student’s understanding, drawing him to alter his perspectives and conceptualizations. It is as if the teacher, structurally, is an embodiment of what Code calls the “*instituting* social imaginary,” where testimony operates as a “sustained critical-creative activity” in the classroom. By putting the student into question, testimony simultaneously creates an inescapable “epistemic responsibility” for the hearer, for it *calls* him to respond. To be a student is to be answerable, to respond by answering. Although the student is not in a strong position to adjudicate the testimony’s epistemic dimension, the relation of non-indifference to the teacher calls the student to take a stand on something, and thus come into presence, becoming more visible as his own person, unique.⁸ The student’s epistemic responsibility to the teacher’s testimony opens up the student to something beyond himself, to becoming more than he is presently. In his *response*, in its concrete particulars, the student becomes a concrete location for natality, a spot where newness can enter the world.⁹ More strongly, the epistemic responsibility of the student, in his response, might affirm the unsettling of the instituted social imaginary. In this way, education might be a concrete location that helps move

society towards more ethical arrangements, a concrete location for responding positively to the call of justice.

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1. For a detailed description, see Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30–32.
 2. For an illuminating discussion of the distinction between “who” and “what” with respect to the idea of person, see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992), 57–61.
 3. For an account of the defining role of trust with respect to being a student, see Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 25.
 4. For my interpretation of uniqueness, I draw on Emmanuel Levinas, “Uniqueness,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshaw (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 189–96; and for an account of the uniqueness of the student, see Clarence W. Joldersma, “Beyond Rational Autonomy: Levinas and the Incomparable Worth of the Student as Singular Other,” *Interchange* 39, no. 1 (2008): 21–47.
 5. Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29–37.
 6. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2003), 131, 132.
 7. See Clarence W. Joldersma, “The Importance of Enjoyment and Inspiration for Learning from a Teacher,” in *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason*, ed. Denise Egéa-Kuehne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 52.
 8. Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 54.
 9. For a connection between Arendt’s idea of natality and education, see Biesta, *Beyond Learning*, 48, 81; and see also Mordechai Gordon, ed., *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing Our Common World* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002).