The Educational Relevance of the Awkwardness of Mistakes

Tyson Lewis

University of North Texas

It is common in contemporary, progressive educational circles to believe that it is important for students to "learn from their mistakes." Instead of punishing mistakes, mistakes present learning opportunities. This approach destigmatizes mistakes, offering up the reassuring moto "try again, fail again, fail better!" Likewise, within the flexible economic model of neoliberalism, the entrepreneurial self must continually recoup all mistakes in order to engage in self-initiated lifelong learning. While apparently very different in nature—the former advocating individual, exploratory, constructivist learning and the other economic adaptability and responsiveness—both share a common educational imperative: mistakes must be made operative, made functional for promoting development of the learner. The mistake can never be simply a mistake, but must be absorbed back into the progressive structure of learning. Indeed, one might even go so far as to suggest that for learning theory today (on the left and right of the political and economic scales), the outside of learning (mistakes) is not so much antithetical to learning so much as learning's newly minted motor. The external, nonfunctional, seemingly miseducational byproduct of learning (mistakes) have been incorporated back into the system of learning as its essential mechanism for enhancing the overall learning experience.

But this is not the only way to approach mistakes in educational theory and practice. In this paper, I offer an alternative approach, one that does not value mistakes for their functional role in a learning economy. Instead of transforming mistakes into operative drivers of further learning, I offer an *inoperative* understanding of mistakes, or rather mistakes *as* mistakes. To do so, I find educational use in the awkwardness of the mistake, and argue that awkwardness should not be overcome in order to correct course. In short, my analysis shifts from assessing the value of mistakes in terms of learning outcomes to recognizing in the mistake something that cannot be incorporated back into

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION | Amy Shuffelton, editor
© 2024 Philosophy of Education Society

processes measured in terms of progress, advancement, or development, thus remaining wrong-ward and destituent. As practices that embrace the waywardness of mistakes, I then conclude with the examples of the syllabus-as-dérive and the pataphysical protocol as two educational practices for producing and then preserving the awkwardness of mistakes. Each, as will be demonstrated, suspend the laws of learning to unleash an awkwardness that is in common and without measure.

MORE AWKWARDNESS, PLEASE?

In his brilliantly insightful and entertaining book *Awkwardness*, Adam Kotsko develops a philosophy of awkwardness that is fitting for our increasingly awkward social reality. Much like the word mistake, awkwardness means wrong-ward or indicates something turning in the wrong direction. Keeping this basic definition in mind, Kotsko then outlines three kinds of culturally pervasive forms of awkwardness: everyday, cultural, and radical. These states of awkwardness are, for Kotsko, becoming increasingly prevalent because of overall social, political, and economic instability brought about by de-industrialization, post-Fordist production, and the (more-or-less simultaneous) rise of civil rights movements. Symptomatic here are the radical upheavals of the 1960s and a concomitant erosion of "traditional values" which had provided a (repressive and exclusionary) *logo*. Without such a *logos*, social norms have become increasingly fragile and ungrounded, opening up an expanded terrain of awkwardness that is perhaps best captured in the dialectic between Trump's totally unhinged assaultive speech (which desperately attempts to thwart the awkwardness white, males feel by a loss of *their logos* by provoking escalating fits of awkwardness) and the liberal attempts to regain some kind of civil discourse through a notion of "political correctness" (which also does not solve the problem so much as create awkward forms of backlash). I would add to Kotsko's general thesis the observation that this crisis has also been accompanied with the rise of the "learning society" with a twin emphasis on the simultaneous need for conservative, common core standards to hold off the rising tide of awkwardness on a cultural level and liberal pushback that favors individualized, constructivist learning which embraces awkwardness as part of exploratory learning. Somehow,

questions of awkwardness are mediated through these discourses and practices, which in the end, are both symptoms of a shared crisis.[1]

To begin, everyday awkwardness is perhaps the most intuitively simple of Kotsko's three variants and suggests that the source of awkwardness in a given situation is the responsibility of particularly awkward individuals. Here, it is the individual who is awkward. To remove the individual then, is to solve the problem of awkwardness, and thereby return the situation to normal. To move from a wrong-ward direction to a right-ward direction, one can simply eliminate the bad apples.

Kotsko provides ample examples of everyday awkwardness in media culture, including the US version of *The Office*, in which individual characters are portrayed as causing workplace awkwardness. For instance, the manager of Dunder-Mifflin paper company, Michael Scott, generates awkwardness through his hapless buffoonery, which is viewed with ironic amusement by more normal (non-awkward) characters such as Pam and Jim. There is an overall sense that the awkwardness Michael produces could be solved if *he* were simply removed. Of course, there is always the possibility that someone of equal or greater awkwardness might replace him, which is the case with the series, but the possibility remains real.

In an educational setting such as a classroom, it is also common to hear teachers adopt a similar philosophy of awkwardness. If it were not for that "one bad apple," the class would be perfectly fine. On such a view, the troublemaking student interrupts an otherwise perfectly normal classroom by suddenly forcing it in the wrong direction through inappropriate behaviors that transgress expectations for proper classroom behavior. We might call this the conservative educational version of everyday awkwardness for it is the individual's responsibility to mind the laws of learning or else be punished.

But there is a serious flaw with this analysis of awkwardness. For Kotsko, awkwardness is first and foremost *social* rather than individual. Indeed, he utilizes Heidegger to argue that awkwardness is a special kind of mood that is shared or held in common with others. What makes awkwardness so unique is

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.021

precisely this intersubjective dimension. Unlike Heidegger's more famous analyses of anxiety and boredom, both of which are highly personal and suggest a withdraw from the social world, awkwardness indicates that one is always already in a social situation in which one cannot fully escape. One is always dealing with others, wrapped up with others, and as such, always exposed to the possibility of making a wrong turn or taking a mistake that violates certain social laws, norms, and expectations. To think that awkwardness is simply the result of individual choices or dispositions is to miss that awkwardness underlies every situation in which we find ourselves as members of a world. Second, it also lets off the hook the social order itself. When awkwardness is projected onto an individual coworker or student, focus shifts away from social laws as *producing* or *inducing* awkwardness (for some and not for others). It is here that Kotsko turns to his second form of awkwardness: cultural.

Cultural awkwardness proposes that the problem is not individuals but the social system as such: its norms, laws, and values produce the problem of awkwardness, that, in turn, is leveraged by the system to continually promote the illusion of itself as perfectly functional and reasonable. Kotsko points toward the films of Judd Apatow for examples of such cultural awkwardness. In many of Apatow's films, the cultural and social systems are fundamentally broken, producing an awkward surplus, especially for male characters who no longer can believe in the ideology of the white, male, productive citizen, father, protector. Such characters are left without a firm cultural orientation to guide them in what it means to be a man, and thus continually fall off track, creating awkward situations for themselves and others around them.

Yet the implicit critique of the culture as broken, flawed, awkward is often resolved in Apatow's films with a reaffirmation of the very cultural norms and values which they satirize. In short, Apatow's hapless male characters who actively resist becoming fathers, husbands, or productive employees, end up getting married and living happily ever after. Summarizing this recouperation of awkwardness by an already awkward system, Kotsko writes, "The way to lie with the awkward, broken system that married adulthood has become is to redouble the awkwardness by making the utopian awkwardness represented

by male bonding the servant of the very order it thinks it's fighting against."[2]

A similar approach to awkwardness can be seen in many contemporary, liberal and/or progressive approaches to education in which mistakes are *opportunities* to turn lemons into lemonade. For liberal progressives, there is an increasing emphasis on learning from mistakes, or helping students correct their mis-takes through re-takes. Psychological and social benefits of mistakes are repeatedly acknowledged. On the side of teaching, learning from mistakes is part of what it means to be a critically reflective practitioner.[3] And on the side of the student, mistakes are an inherent factor in learning to learn (as a lifelong skill).[4] Awkwardness, on this view, is a means to an end: the production of the life-long learner who uses mistakes as opportunities for self-improvement. Awkwardness is thus made operative and included in the learning cycle as part of the movement of development rather than an obstacle to such development. Mistaken awkwardness is not only tolerated but celebrated as integral to an experientially oriented process of learning.

While I do not want to underestimate the value of this perspective from the standpoint of the individual learner, it is important to recognize such trends as symptomatic of the broader shifts toward cultural awkwardness outlined above in which the "laws" of learning (implicit and explicit norms and values dictating what it means to be educationally productive) appear to be wavering and unsteady. Under the pressures of the "learning society," which aims for individuals to constantly remain flexible and adaptive to post-industrial economic demands, awkwardness is recouped as a solution to the awkward failures of standardized approaches to educational problems.[5] Individual, entrepreneurial selves can try, fail, and fail better, and in this way, overcome the awkwardness of educational institutions through a mitigation of their own experience of awkwardness now made productive.

According to this view, awkwardness is a means to an end: the stabilization of an unstable and increasingly ungrounded educational system anxious to find solutions to its own failings. But what would happen if awkwardness were a pure means rather than a means to an end? For Kotsko, this question pushes him to his next category: radical awkwardness. In a state of radial awkwardness

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.021

there is no longer any set of governing norms or laws mediating behavior in a situation. As Kotsko summarizes, in such a state, "awkwardness [is] enjoyed for its own sake…becoming its own kind of grace."[6] Instead of norms against which behavior can be evaluated, judged, and ultimately included or excluded as part of a community, an awkward community suspends and renders inoperative such standards of measure, and instead exposes individuals to one another directly and without mediation (of the law). In what might strike some as an unusual move, Kotsko turns to the television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the caustic character created by Larry David as an example of radical awkwardness. For Kotsko, the underlying philosophical importance of this show is the new theory of political community that it proposes: "That no one should be forced to conform to the arbitrary social norms of others…."[7] Larry David, at his best, does not simply (a) reduce awkwardness to individuals, or (b) attempt to prop up social norms by employing awkwardness as ideological support. Instead, he merely *dwells* in and *enjoys* awkwardness as an open-ended question that is shared, that is held in common. Indeed, this silly and irreverent show actually reveals how awkwardness as a mood has a certain ontological priority over anxiety and boredom insofar as it demonstrates that we are always already together in a state of ambiguity that laws and social order attempt to negate, deny, or repress (as much as possible).

In terms of education, this would mean that awkwardness would be both necessary and sufficient for an experience to be educational, and this stands in stark contrast to individual and cultural approaches to awkwardness. In the first case, awkwardness was an undesirable interruption caused by a disruptive individual who interfered with learning. As such, the individual must be punished, reprimanded, set straight, or expelled so that the learning situation can return to the status quo. In such cases, awkwardness is neither necessary nor sufficient to define an educational experience. Indeed, it is decisively anti-educational. In the second case, awkwardness is necessary but never sufficient. It is necessary because learning itself has become awkward, meaning that its certainty and confidence in standards has come under attack, and as a response, it has found progressive ways to incorporate awkwardness into its learning

logic. But, such awkwardness is never sufficient in itself, as it must be made operative according to an awkward law of learning that says all mistakes ought to be converted into potentialities for improvement, growth, and development. The awkwardness needs to be supplemented by a certain orientation toward learning goals (made into a means to an end). But in the third case, awkwardness is not only necessary but also sufficient for a unique kind of educational life to emerge. In a radically awkward moment, norms are suspended, opening up the possibility to experiment without blame and without shame with a form of life that is not predetermined or predestined according to any law. The exploration of this emergent and indeterminate form of life is not oriented toward some future learning assessment, but is rather about mis-taking an opportunity to experiment with what is possible now without a way to evaluate it according to preexisting standards. This is sufficient insofar as it manifests a new kind of awkward community that does not know who or what it is or where it is going, and thus is radically open to others without preconditions saying who or what is permissible. It is therefore an educational immersion in a space and time of experimentation with what is possible for a community defined in terms of mis-taking itself, or a community that only know itself by mis-taking itself.

AWKWARDNESS AS AN EDUCATIONAL MEANS WITHOUT END

In this section, I want to briefly put forth two examples of radically awkward educational practices. The first comes from Jesse Ball's unusual book *Notes on My Dunce Cap*. As the title already suggests, Ball is interested in awkwardness and mis-takes. For Ball, a "class" ought to be a space and time that "exists in despite of the world beyond its borders," in the sense that the classroom ought to open up a "small and separate cosmos—a joyful laboratory" in which students can experiment.[8] The experiment can be loosely structured by writing a syllabus, but this is a syllabus that promotes a particularly educational form of awkwardness. It does so by carving out a space and time that suspends the world and its norms and values. The resulting gap between what is expected and what is possible is the precise location of awkwardness in Ball's practice. Furthermore, the syllabus should not describe the class as it will happen so much as set up the outline of an experiment in which chance will always be present.

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.021

Chance, swerve effects, and contingencies are not negated by the syllabus but rather are enabled, a space and time are held open for them to emerge. In other words, the syllabus is, as Ball describes, an "instigation" for experimentation, or, as we might say, for dwelling in awkwardness.[9]

Perhaps what is most interesting in *Notes on My Dunce Cap* is not Ball's pedagogical musings so much as the extensive set of syllabi he provides the reader. A case in point is Ball's syllabus for a class on the dérive. Actually, it is not so much a class about the derive as it is a class as a dérive. The syllabus for this class is as intriguing as it is vague. Instead of a list of dates, policies, and assignment details as per the normal syllabus, Ball provides a syllabus that instigates an aesthetic reaction on the part of the viewer. It is an instigation to join in a dérive without any certainty as to what the actual class will be like, how it will actually operate, or what will actually be assessed. For instance, Ball simply writes that the class will have the following format: (a) go on a dérive, (b) read a book, (c) prepare an account of (a) and (b) to be shared in common with others in the class. A letter from Guy Debord explaining the dérive is then attached to the syllabus followed by a form to be filled out after one attempts a dérive that includes the following categories: time, place, initial plan, person/persons encountered, description of the dérive's shape, and misunderstandings created.

Importantly, this kind of syllabus encourages wrong-ward or mis-taken steps in order to produce iterations of awkwardnesses (misunderstandings). These misunderstandings are not then overcome or corrected (so as to "fail" better in the future), but rather embraced as generative of iterative variants without hierarchical value. Each dérive is dwelled in as pure means that has forgotten its end. From the perspective of the learning society, such an event of misunderstanding might appear to lack educational relevance or value, but for Ball, it would seem that this is precisely the point: to neutralize the *telos* of learning (whether that be for self-improvement or economic viability) so as to enable one to experience awkwardness as such, without the pressures exerted by the jeopardized law of learning. The syllabus provides the minimal scaffolding necessary to support such efforts while also leaving ample space and time for improvisational acts and chance happenings to neutralize this very scaffolding

by piling up. This means that the syllabus as instigation is not a "plan" so much as a starting point for a drifting waywardness that is not oriented toward assessing potentialities in terms of measurement so much as unleashing destitutent potentialities without measure.

The second example is the idea of the "protocol."[10] The idea of the protocol is a simple one: like Ball's syllabus, the protocol is a set of minimal constraints that suspend the laws of learning in order to unleash experimental variants. Constraints, on this interpretation, are not laws. Instead, they are tactical devices for rendering inoperative certain learning laws or what might be called the "learning law of conversion" in which all mis-takes must be converted into re-takes that lead toward identifiable and measurable results. When such laws are left idle, then real experimentation can emerge with ideas, materials, and practices. But such practices are, as has been emphasized in the literature on protocoling, "awkward."[11] Awkwardness in this sense is radical precisely because it is what emerges when laws are no longer there to guide practitioners. The constraints suspend the coordinates one can use to orient oneself according to professional standards or expected learning outcomes. The experiment is an improvisation with what is possible when such laws are displaced. One can only improvise with a protocol as there is no longer clarity about what is expected. Instead of absorbing awkwardness into the forward thrust of learning, it is left drifting.

While we most often think of constraints as limiting experimental risk taking, protocols actually encourage it. The constraints are there to insert a distance between the participants and the laws that bind them to particular social roles, social functions, and common-sense meanings. They create a zone of estrangement, or a gap, that is just wide enough to enable awkwardness to emerge. Inspiration for such use of protocol rules can be found in pataphysical writers and poets who use sets of arbitrary or absurdist constraints to break the laws of grammar and good and common sense in order to experiment with language in new, often awkward, ways that do not communicate meaning so much as reveal latent potentialities or pliable possibilities within language.[12]

When done collectively, an enacted protocol pushes participants beyond

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.021

their comfort zones into a situation of existential risk. Instead of mis-takes turning into re-takes for the sake of learning, the protocol redefines mis-takes as risk-takes. Something is at stake in such mis-takes and that is the status of a shared, common potentiality that is no longer subservient to a stated end.

Here is one example of such a protocol which the author and several of his colleagues performed at the American Educational Research Association several years ago. The protocol was simple: take a printed out copy of a dataset concerning New York City public schools and render the data inoperative. We did not give any more instructions, but provided the participants with an array of strange objects and equipment. The pile of stuff included candy, cheap toys, stapples, nails, wire, glitter, glue, paint, empty plastic cups, and so forth. We had literally no idea what people would do with this protocol and were quite shocked and surprised by the results.

Some transformed the data into a poem, others created a small game with moving parts and attending absurdist rules. The experiment was clearly awkward for many participants who engaged in the activity with nervous laughter and uncertain glances. One group simply could not bring themselves to do much of anything, ending up producing a visual graph to illustrate the data. They protested that one ought not to tinker with such data, as this was "serious" and "vital" information about public schools that concerned real children and real teachers. This last group was most interesting, as they seemed incapable of distancing themselves from the belief in the sacredness of data, its intrinsic worth, its functionality, and its objective value in saving education. Indeed, I would argue that for them, the experiment brought about a state of individual awkwardness in which the system was perfectly fine, and that it was we—the loons that created this mess—that were the awkward ones.

For the other groups, there was less resistance to the protocol, and they ended up enjoying the common awkwardness of crawling around on the floor at a conference with strangers while building absurdist games and scribbling nonsensical poems. In short, a different kind of improvisational educational community emerged that did not know exactly what it was supposed to do or be. It no longer organized itself around the laws of learning so much as around

a set of constraints that opened up a space and time for mis-taking to turn into risk-taking with destituent potentiality (no longer oriented toward an end).

But what is educational about all this, one might ask? It is educational insofar as it allows participants to experience a different rhythm and modality of community not bound to the law (of learning, for instance). It is a community that is not mediated through the norms which dictate in advance what is proper and improper, right and wrong, important and unimportant, educational and miseducational. And in this sense, the syllabus-as-dérive and the protocol can and do create the time and space for experiencing a potentiality in excess of the law. One does not *learn* anything from these experiences. Instead, one glimpses the joy that can emerge when we all share our awkwardness as the fundamental condition of our collective sociality. In this sense, it is actually an experience of *unlearning* what divides us according to the law, offering instead a return to the unbearably mis-taken origins of being-in-common.

In conclusion, I will offer some brief remarks concerning the politics of radical awkwardness in education. In the typical liberal framework, learning is for the purpose of producing citizens. Through citizenship training and citizenship development, one learns the skills and dispositions necessary to become a fully functional, responsible, critically informed, and actively involved citizen who is willing and able to defend democracy. Thus, citizenship emerges over time, through the course of one's education. Education is the time necessary to cultivate liberal citizenship as a means to a broader political end. On this view, awkwardness is incorporated into education but is also something that ought to be slowly overcome through education. Education offers practice in citizenship building. In the classroom, one can learn from one's mistakes, so that when the time comes to be a citizen and take responsibility, one can do so with confidence and a high degree of competence.

But my description of an awkward education that embraces the mistake rather than trying to turn it into a re-take offers a form of life that is not about delaying political life for a future in which one is confident and competent. Instead, it suggests a utopian alternative in which a new kind of community is actualized in the present moment: an awkward community that is not mediated

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.021

through norms, values, or laws predetermined in advance by particular ideologies (liberal or otherwise). As Kotsko writes, "…awkwardness is a social bond that exists outside the social order, insofar as they have nothing in common aside from the fact of being thrown into a social order where they can never fully belong."[13] This is a community of mis-fits who have come to enjoy their mis-takes even if they do not produce learning outcomes. When students take up a protocol, the awkwardness that emerges is an indication of the profound uncertainty they are faced with. No one knows what to do, where to go, or how to be. Indeed, the very idea of a "mistake" seems inappropriate in this context simply because the standard against which any take can be measured is neutralized. This is a form of life that is not beholden to anything beyond its own (awkward) potentiality. And in this way, students can finally enjoy being awkward together, sharing their awkwardness without judgment and without abandonment. If anything, such an education would be an education beyond tragedy and would instead be comically improvisational. And in this sense, it would not curb our enthusiasm for life—as the title of Larry David's television program sarcastically suggests—so much as intensify and extend it until what is left of education is nothing more than a mis-taken case of life at its fullest yet most inoperative potentiality.

REFERENCES

1 Adam Kotsko, *Awkwardness: An Essay* (Winchester, United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2010).

2 Kotsko, *Awkwardness*, 65.

3 Alessandro Sicora, "Reflective Practice and Learning from Mistakes in Social Work Student Placement," *Social Work Education* 1, no. 38 (2019), 63-74. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2018.1508567

4 Maleka Donaldson, "'Everything Go Upside Down': Navigating Mistakes in Early Learning and Teaching," *Schools* 1, no. 17 (2020), 70-91. https://doi.org/10.1086/708357

5 Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, "The Govenmentalization of Learn-

ing and the Assemblage of a Learning Apparatus," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008), 391-415. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00296.x

6 Kotsko, *Awkwardness,* 69.

7 Kotsko, *Awkwardness*, 79.

8 Jesse Ball, *Notes on My Dunce Cap* (New York: Pioneer Works Press, 2015): 14-15.

9 Ball, *Notes,* 29.

10 Tyson E. Lewis and Peter Hyland, *Studious Drift: Movements and Protocols for a Postdigital Education* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022). https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452968124

11 Tyson E. Lewis, Daniel Friedrich, and Peter Hyland, "Organizing a Studious Conference for Public Experimentation," *Visual Arts Research* 44, no. 1 (2018), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.5406/visuartsrese.44.1.0001

12 Christian Bök, *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

13 Kotsko, *Awkwardness,* 88.

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.021