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Freeing Teaching from Learning: Opening Up Existential Possibilities in Educational Relationships

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Abstract In this paper I explore the relationship between teaching and learning. Whereas particularly in the English language the relationship between teaching and learning has become so intimate that it often looks as if 'teaching and learning' has become one word, I not only argue for the importance of keeping teaching and learning apart from each other, but also provide a number of arguments for suggesting that learning may not be the one and only option for teaching to aim for. I explore this idea through a discussion of the relationship between teaching and learning, both at a conceptual and at an existential level. I discuss the limitations of the language of learning as an educational language, point at the political work that is being done through the language of learning, and raise epistemological and existential questions about the identity of the learner, particularly with regard to the question what it means to be in and with the world in terms of learning as comprehension and sense making. Through this I seek to suggest that learning is only one possible aim for teaching and that the learner identity and the learning way of engaging with the world puts the learner in a very specific position vis-à-vis the world, one where the learner remains in the centre and the world appears as object for the learner's acts of learning. That it is possible to teach without requesting from students that they learn, comprehend and make sense, is demonstrated through a brief account of a course in which students were explicitly asked to refrain from learning and were instead asked to adopt a concept. I show how this request opened up very different existential possibilities for the students and argue that if we value such existential possibilities, there may be good reasons for freeing teaching from learning.

This paper is published on the occasion of the end of my tenure as editor-in-chief of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, a role I had from 1999 until 2014.

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Introduction

The phrase 'teaching and learning' has become so prominent in the English language, that it often feels as if has become one word—teachingandlearning. But what actually is the relationship between teaching and learning? Does teaching necessarily lead to learning? Should the sole ambition of teaching be to promote or bring about learning? Can we assume that teaching causes learning? Is the relationship between teaching and learning therefore to be understood as a relationship of cause and effect? Or is it a relationship between the meaning of concepts, so that to use the word 'teaching' without assuming the word 'learning' makes no sense? Are teaching and learning necessarily connected? Is it possible to think of teaching outside of the confines of learning? Can teaching be meaningful if it explicitly tries to keep students away from learning? And for what reasons might that be a good idea?

In this paper I seek to engage with these questions. I do this first of all in order to clarify the relationship between teaching and learning, but also in order to explore some of the limits and limitations of the alleged connection between teaching and learning. I believe that this is not only important for theoretical reasons, as questions about the relationship between teaching and learning go to the very heart of educational scholarship and educational practice. A better understanding of how teaching and learning are related, if at all, is also important politically, as it can help to get a better sense of what teachers can be held responsible for and what not. This is particularly significant given the fact that politicians and policy makers nowadays are often expecting far too much from teachers, particularly with regard to what, in unhelpful language, is referred to as the 'production' of 'learning outcomes.'

The paper is structured in the following way. I begin with a review of literature on the topic of the relationship between teaching and learning, particularly focusing on contributions from the theory and philosophy of education. The main aim of this step is to raise some questions about the suggestion that teaching and learning are necessarily and intimately connected. I then indicate some problems with the recent rise of the language of learning in educational research, policy and practice, highlighting how the 'learnification' (Biesta 2009) of educational discourse has marginalised a number of key educational questions, particularly regarding the purposes of teaching and of education more widely. Against this background I zoom in on the idea of the learner, asking what, in common understandings of learning, it actually means to 'exist' as a learner. Here I particularly focus on the idea that learning is to be understood as an act of sense making or comprehension. After this I raise an epistemological and an existential question. The epistemological question has to do with the difference between knowing and meaning making as processes of construction (literally sense *making*) and as processes of reception. The existential question has to do with the difference between being in the world as a constructor, as a receiver, or as one being addressed or spoken to by who and what is other. Against this background I present, in a final step, a concrete example of a course I taught in which I asked my students to refrain from sense making and understanding, that is, to refrain from learning. I finish the paper with my conclusions about the relationship between teaching and learning.

The Teaching–Learning Connection: On Teaching, Studenting and Pupilling

A helpful place to start the discussion is by asking whether the overall intention of teaching should be to bring about learning. While many would probably at first sight respond to this question with an 'of course,' there are a number of reasons why it might make sense to keep teaching and learning a bit more separate from each other. One obvious reason for doing so is to stay away from the mistaken idea that teaching can be understood as the *cause* of learning. Such an idea, which is connected to notions of teaching as an intervention and to mechanistic understandings of the complexities of education, is problematic because it puts the entire responsibility for the achievements of students on the shoulders of the teacher, suggesting that students are merely willing objects of intervention, rather than thinking and acting subjects who carry responsibility for their part of the educational process. So what then is the relationship between teaching and learning? And what should teachers intend to bring about, if it is not learning?

With regard to the first question some authors have argued that the relationship between teaching and learning is not a relationship between *events*—which is the assumption underlying the idea that teaching is the cause of learning—but rather a relationship between *concepts*, so that the meaning of the word 'learning' is included in the (proper use of the) word 'teaching,' or that the meaning of the word 'teaching' is included in the (proper use of the) word 'learning.' The latter suggestion can easily be refuted, as it is obvious that people can learn without teaching (which doesn't suggest that there may not be learning that actually requires teaching). Refuting the first suggestion is slightly more difficult, and there are indeed authors who have argued that the concept of 'teaching' *necessarily* involves the concept of 'learning.' Here is, for example, how John Dewey put it.

> Teaching may be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone buys. We should ridicule a merchant who said that he had sold a great many goods although no one had bought any. But perhaps there are teachers who think they have done a good day's teaching irrespective of what people have learned. There is the same exact equation between teaching and learning that there is between selling and buying. (Dewey 1933, pp. 35–36)

While at a very general level Dewey's suggestion makes sense, we nonetheless need to be careful. This is not only in order to make sure that people do not read a statement about the relationship between *concepts* as a claim about an alleged relationship between *events* (in the quote above Dewey actually gets quite close to doing this himself). It is also because, at a conceptual level, the word 'teaching' can be used correctly without the need for the teaching to have resulted in learning. The latter has to do with some ambiguities in the word 'teaching.'

Komisar (1968) has suggested a helpful distinction between teaching as an *occupation*, as a general *enterprise*, and as an *act*. Occupation, enterprise and act provide three different answers to the question as to what a person is doing when he or she says he is teaching. First of all it can mean that the person either is a teacher (occupation) or is engaged in the activity of teaching. With regard to the latter Komisar has further suggested a distinction between the general 'enterprise' of teaching and specific 'acts' of teaching. Teachers spending an hour with their students may be engaged in the enterprise of teaching but not everything they do (e.g., handing out worksheets, lining up their students, showing a video-clip) may count as an act of teaching. Komisar gives the slightly more interesting example of a situation where a teacher has been expressing his own prejudices about a topic but then

stops doing so "and is finally teaching again" (Komisar 1968, p. 174). This suggests that to identify a particular act as an instance of teaching is not a factual matter but actually implies a *judgement* about the purposes and intentions of the act, for example in order to distinguish teaching from indoctrination (I return to the question of purpose below).

A second relevant distinction is between teaching as *task* and teaching as *achievement* (see, for example, MacMillan and Nelson 1968). This distinction goes back to the work of the philosopher Gilbert Ryle who, in a more general sense, distinguishes between task verbs such as to race, to seek and to reach, and achievement or success verbs such as to win, to find, and to grasp (Ryle 1952). Using this distinction we can say that using the word 'teaching' to refer to the task does not necessarily imply that the task will lead to success, i.e., that it is followed by the achievement. To say "I taught him Latin for years, but he learnt nothing" (Peters 1967, p. 2) is a correct way to use the word 'teaching' in the task-sense of the word. If, on the other hand, we would shift to the achievement-sense, we would probably say something like "I *tried* to teach him Latin for years, but he did not learn anything." These considerations have led several authors—such as Israel Scheffler and B. Othanel Smith—to the stronger claim that conceptually teaching does *not* imply learning. This idea is known in the literature as the 'standard thesis' see Noddings 2012, p. 49; see also Komisar 1968). But what, then, might the intention of teaching be, if it is not learning?

To answer this question, we need to look at another set of ambiguities, this time connected to the word 'learning.' In the English language—and it will be interesting to explore how this 'works' in other languages—'learning' is used both to refer to a process and to the outcome of the process. To use the word 'learning' in the second sense (as achievement in the terms introduced above) is not very contentious as long as we do not think of it in terms of a product; 'achievement' or 'result' are better terms here. Although there is a significant body of literature that deals with the complexities of definitions of learning (for an overview and discussion see Hodkinson et al. 2008), many authors agree with a basic definition of learning as any more or less durable change that is not the result of maturation. This definition highlights that learning is not about *any* change on the side of the one learning, but about change that has some permanence. And it makes a distinction between change that is the result of the interaction of individuals with their environment, and change that is just the result of biologically or genetically 'programmed' processes. What it is that actually changes when we say that people have learned, is a question for further elaboration. It can, for example, be change in knowledge, or in ability, or understanding, or behaviour, or emotion, and so on.

Many authors would agree that what actually brings about learning so understood, is what students *do* (albeit that there are some further issues in relation to this assumption to which I will return below as well). Should we therefore also use the word 'learning' to refer to what student *do*—which would be using learning also as a task-word? This is actually a more unhelpful use of the word, and in my view a significant degree of confusion in discussions about learning stems from using the word both to refer to an activity and the result of the activity. We can already see a problem with using the word 'learning' to refer to an activity in the situation where a teacher would say to students: "For the next half hour I want you all to learn"—as students will most likely ask "But what do you want us to *do*?" This has led Fenstermacher (1986, p. 39) to suggest that the idea that teachers convey or impart some content to their students is actually mistaken. Rather, the teacher "instructs the student on how to acquire the content from the teacher, text, or other source" (ibid., p. 39).

Fenstermacher has therefore argued that what teachers should aim for—and thus what the intention of teaching should be—is what he has suggested to refer to as ‘studenting,’ similar to what B. Othanel Smith calls ‘pupilling’ (see ibid.). With the notion of studenting, Fenstermacher is able to say in a much more precise manner what the act of teaching is about, namely that of “instructing the learner on the procedures and demands of the studenting role, selecting the material to be learned, adapting that material so that it is appropriate to the level of the learner, constructing the most appropriate opportunities for the learner to gain access to the content (…), monitoring and appraising the student’s progress, and serving the learner as one of the primary sources of knowledge and skill” (ibid., pp. 39–40).

By making the distinction between studenting and learning, Fenstermacher not only introduces concepts that allow us to say with much more precision what teachers should intend to bring about; he also makes it possible to identify much more clearly who in the educational relationship is responsible for which part of the process, and therefore who can be held accountable for what. He explains this as follows:

> On this new scheme, the teacher is held accountable for the activities proper to being a student (the task sense of ‘learning’), not the demonstrated acquisition of content by the learner (the achievement sense of ‘learning’). Thus a learner who fails a reasonably valid and reliable test of content covered in instruction must accept a major share of the responsibility for this failure. To the extent the student lacks the skills of studenting needing to perform well on this test, is given no opportunity to exercise these skills, or is in no helpful way encouraged to engage with the material to be learned, the teacher must accept a major share of responsibility for the student’s failure. (ibid., p. 40)

The notion of studenting thus helps to create some distance between teaching and learning, albeit that for Fenstermacher the outcome of the act of studenting is still described as learning—which explains why he refers to the person doing the studenting as a ‘learner’ rather than as a ‘student’ (on this distinction see also Biesta 2010a). Komisar (1968) went one step further when he not only stated explicitly that “learning is not what the ‘teacher’ intends to produce” (ibid., p. 183), but also suggested that the intention of teaching might better be captured in terms of the ‘awareness’ of an ‘auditor’—not a learner or student for Komisar—“*who is successfully becoming aware of the point of the act* [of teaching]” (ibid., p. 191; emph. in original).

What I have established so far, then, is that we should neither think of teaching as the cause of learning, nor that teaching is necessarily aimed at bringing about learning. I have also shown that there is no necessary *conceptual* connection between ‘teaching’ and ‘learning.’ With Fenstermacher we might say, therefore, that learning—as task and as achievement—is ‘of the learner,’ and that what teachers should try to bring about is not the learning itself, but the activity of studenting. In this set up, learning is, at most, the ‘effect’ of the activity of studenting, but not of the activity of teaching. And this is a helpful insight for indicating with more precision what teachers can be held responsible and accountable for, and what not.

Having created some distance between teaching and learning, the next question is how much learning we actually need or should want in education. This brings me to the second step in my argument.

The Problem with Learning: The 'Learnification' of Education[1]

Whereas authors such as Fenstermacher provide a strong argument against the idea that teaching should aim to bring about learning, he nonetheless still sees learning as the last step in the process, in that ultimately the studenting of students should result in their learning. It is here that I wish to introduce some further problems with regard to the idea of learning and its role in educational theory, research and practice. The first issue has to do with a phenomenon to which I have elsewhere referred as the 'learnification' of educational discourse and practice (see particularly Biesta 2009, 2010b). 'Learnification' refers to the relatively recent tendency to express much if not all there is to say about education in terms of a language of learning. We can see, this for example, in the tendency to refer to students, pupils, children and adults as 'learners,' to refer to schools as 'learning environments or 'places for learning,' and to see teachers as 'facilitators of learning.' Also the redesignation of the field of 'adult education' into that of 'lifelong learning' is an example of the rise of the 'new language of learning' (Biesta 2009, 2010b). I would also say that the suggestion that the point of education is that students learn is part of this development, and there are indeed many examples—in national, local and school-level policies but also in descriptions of the task of teachers—that state that the task of schools is to make students learn and that teachers have a particular responsibility in facilitating the learning of their learners.

My point here is not to criticise the idea of learning in itself (although there are further issues that require discussion but these fall outside of the scope of this paper), but to highlight the insufficiency of the language of learning as an *educational* language, that is a language of and for education and educators. In its shortest formula the issue here is that the point of education is not that students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn it for particular *reasons*, and that they learn it *from someone*. The problem with the language of learning is that it is a language that refers to processes that are 'empty' with regard to content and purpose. So just to say that children should learn or that teachers should facilitate learning, or that we all should be lifelong learners, actually says very little—if it says anything at all. Unlike the language of learning, a language of education always needs to pay attention to questions of *content*, *purpose* and *relationships*. The danger with the rise of the language of learning in education is that these questions are no longer asked, or they are already taken to be answered (for example on the suggestion that the only relevant content is academic content, that the only relevant purpose is academic achievement, and the only relevant relationship is for teachers to train students so that they generate the highest possible test scores, for themselves, their school, and their country).

Of the three dimensions—content, purpose, and relationships—the question of purpose is the most important and fundamental question, because it is only once we have been able to indicate what it is that we seek to achieve through our educational activities and endeavours, that we can make decisions about the appropriate content students should engage with, and that we can decide how educational relationships can be used most productively. As I have suggested elsewhere (Biesta 2010b), what distinguishes education from many other human practices is the fact that it doesn't work in relation to only one purpose, but actually functions in relation to a number of 'domains of purpose.'

The argument is relatively simple and starts from the observation that in all instances of education—both at the 'big' level of national curricula or school systems and at the 'small'

[1] I apologise to those readers who have encountered the ideas presented in this section before—they are, however, an important step in the overall argument of this paper.

level of teachers working with their students—education is always about the transmission and acquisition of some content (knowledge, skills, dispositions), but always also 'connects' students to particular traditions and ways of doing and being and, in addition, has an impact on their formation as a person (either positively, for example by giving them knowledge, skills and connections to networks that empower them, or negatively when, for example, they are being told to 'know their place'). In more theoretical language I have therefore suggested that education always functions in relation to three domains: that of *qualification*, that of *socialisation* and that of what, with a technical term, I have referred to as *subjectification*, which is about the ways in which students can be(come) subjects in their own right and not just remain objects of the desires and directions of others.

If it is the case that all education always *functions* in relation to these three domains, then it is reasonable to ask from teachers and others who are involved in the design and execution of education to take explicit responsibility for the potential impact of their work in each of the three domains. This means that qualification, socialisation and subjectification not only appear as three *functions of education*, but also as three *domains of educational purpose*—three qualitatively different domains with regard to which we need to state and justify what it is we seek to achieve with our students, and what we seek our students to achieve.

Although qualification, socialisation and subjectification can be distinguished, it is important to see that they cannot be separated or singled out. This means, on the one hand, that even schools that claim only to focus on qualification are still impacting in the domains of socialisation and subjectification. It means, on the other hand, that teachers and others involved in the design and execution of education are always faced with finding a *meaningful balance* between the three domains, bearing in mind that what can be achieved in one domain often limits or disturbs what can be achieved in the other domains. The latter can be seen, for example, in the negative impact an excessive focus on achievement in the domain of qualification can have on the formation of the personhood of the student (which has to do both with socialisation and with subjectification).

All this shows why it is so utterly unhelpful to say that the point of education is just to say that students should learn, just as it is utterly unhelpful to suggest that the sole task of teachers is to facilitate the learning of their students. Without specifying what it is that should be learned and, more importantly for what purpose it should be learned, the language of learning is unable to provide a sense of direction for the educational process, which is precisely where its deficiency as an *educational* language lies.

Being a Learner: Politics and Identity

If the previous section has indicated some problems with regard to the *language* of learning, I now wish to discuss some issues that have to do with the existence of the learner, that is, with the question what it means to be or to exist as a learner. These questions partly have to do with the politics of learning and partly with the learner identity. Let me start with the politics of learning (for this phrase see Biesta 2013).

One reason why the language of learning has gained in popularity and prominence may have to do with the fact that learning is increasingly being seen as something natural, and hence as something *inevitable*, that is, as something we cannot *not* do. Lifelong learning scholar John Field (2000, p. 35) writes, for example, that it is an "unavoidable biological fact (that) we learn as we breathe, all the time, without giving it any thought." From the idea that learning is something natural, inevitable and unavoidable, it is only a small step to

hear policy makers say that we therefore *must* learn, and this message is indeed increasingly being spread around the globe. Here is, for example, a statement from the UNESCO report on the 2010 Shanghai Forum on Lifelong Learning.

> We are now living in a fast-changing and complex social, economic and political world to which we need to adapt by increasingly rapidly acquiring new knowledge, skills and attitudes in a wide range of contexts. An individual will not be able to meet life challenges unless he or she becomes a lifelong learner, and a society will not be sustainable unless it becomes a learning society. (Yang and Valdés-Cotera 2011, p. v)

This is but one example of a strategy where learning is being used—and perhaps we could even say: hijacked—to pursue a very specific political agenda that serves a particular segment of society with regard to very specific interests. After all, in this quotation learning is put in the service of the global economy in need of a flexible, adaptable and adjustable work force. In it learning is depicted as an act of *adaptation*, without even hinting at the need of asking what it is that one is supposed to adapt to before one 'decides' to adapt. Gone are the individual's 'freedom to learn' (Rogers 1969) and an understanding of learning in the service of democracy (for example Faure et al. 1972). Instead, learning seems to have become a duty from which there is really no escape—which gives added significance to the word 'lifelong' in the idea of lifelong learning!

The foregoing provides a clear example of the 'politics of learning' where political problems, such as questions about the economy and about social cohesion, are turned into learning problems, and where individuals are subsequently tasked to contribute to the solution of these problems through their learning. While there are situations where the request or demand for learning is entirely legitimate—we rightly want people to have driving lessons before they drive a car or are properly trained and educated before they practice medicine—the demand to learn should not become all encompassing. After all, there are also situations where the demand to learn is inappropriate or unjustified—we should not be willing to adapt and adjust to just any situation—and there are situations where there is actually nothing to learn—for example with regard to the question who, in a democracy, can have a voice (a question that has to do with one's status as a citizen, not with whether or not one is able to pass a citizenship exam; see Biesta 2011).

If this gives an indication of how particular political forces are 'positioning' us as learners and also of why it might be important not to immediately and automatically accept such positioning, the other point I wish to discuss has to do with the more general identity of 'the learner,' that is, with the question what it means to exist as a learner. This is a complex discussion because at one level there are many different definitions and conceptions of learning (Ileris 2008) and it may not be possible to bring them all under one rubric or even to identify a common denominator. Nonetheless I wish to suggest that one strong tendency in contemporary conceptions of learning is to see learning as an act of *comprehension*—that is, as an act of sense making, of understanding of and gaining knowledge about the world 'out there' (which can either be the natural world or the social world). We can think of the underlying 'gesture' of this as a hermeneutical gesture where the world appears to me as something I need to bring to my understanding. While the task of understanding is ongoing—each hermeneutical cycle adds to and modifies our existing understanding, thus providing a new starting point for the next cycle, and so on—learning as comprehension nonetheless puts us in a very specific way in the world. One could say that acts of understanding and interpretation always begin from the self—they are issued by the self, so to speak—go out to the world, and return to the self. In this regard we could

say that learning as comprehension puts the self at the centre and makes the world into an object of the self's comprehension. When we look at the etymology of comprehension we not only find the idea of grasping ('prae hendere') something in its totality ('com'). The Latin word 'hendere' has the same root as 'hedera,' the Latin name for ivy, which invokes the image of a building overgrown by ivy up to the point where the ivy can even destroy the building.

I am playing with these words and images in order to highlight that learning as comprehension puts us in a very particular way 'in' the world and in relation to the world. While there is obviously a place for this way of being in the world, the point I wish to make is that if this is the *only* way in which we conceive of our relation with the world and our position in it, we are seriously limiting our existential possibilities, that is, our possibilities for being in and with the world. One important limitation of the idea of learning as comprehension is that it puts the self at the centre and turns the world into an object for the self. This can turn into a powerful act where it becomes increasingly difficult for the world—and it is important to bear in mind that the world is both the natural and the social world—to speak on its own terms, as a world that addresses me, speaks to me, interrupts me, limits me and de-centres me, rather than that it 'accepts' that I am already the centre and origin of the relationship. This hints at a rather different relationship between the self and the world—one where the first question for the self to ask is not "How can I understand?" but is perhaps closer to something like "What is this asking from me?"

I am not suggesting that it is the one or the other; that we either are in the centre and 'out' to comprehend, or that we are out of the centre, trying to figure out what is being asked from us. But I am suggesting that if our main understanding of learning is that of a (centred) act of 'com-prehension,' and if we are further assuming that this is the natural and inevitable way to be, then we end up in a situation where (such a conception of) learning and such a learner identity seriously limit our existential possibilities, our opportunities for being in and with the world. This may be a further reason for not immediately or automatically assuming that learning is good and desirable and that the learner identity is 'the way to be' and 'the only way to be.'

Construction, Reception, and Being Addressed: On Epistemology and Existence

Before I turn to the question whether any of this can make a difference in the practice of teaching, I wish to briefly allude to some of the philosophical discussions that play in the background of what I have said so far. These discussions partly have to do with the status and nature of knowledge, which is the domain of epistemology or theory of knowledge, and partly with existential questions, that is questions about the ways in which we understand our being in and with the world. With regard to the question of knowledge there is an ongoing discussion within the history of philosophy between the idea that knowledge comes from 'within'—usually referred to as rationalism—and the idea that knowledge comes from 'outside'—usually referred to as empiricism. There are radical empiricists who believe that the mind is a 'blank slate' (John Locke) and that *all* knowledge comes from the outside. There are also radical rationalists who believe that all knowledge is basically already 'in the mind' and that learning and coming to know are basically processes of recollection (this was, for example, Plato's view).

In this discussion there are, on the one hand, references to situations where our sense perception is obviously misleading—the classic example being that of the stick in the water, which appears broken when partly in the water, but straight when out of the water or

when totally immersed—and, on the other, references to situations where we strongly feel that we know something but can never perceive it—such as, for example, the idea of causality (a point made by David Hume, who pointed out that we can see regularity and correlation, but can never observe underlying causal 'mechanisms). The work of Immanuel Kant is commonly understood as a synthesis of empiricism and rationalism through his famous dictum that "percepts without concepts are blind, and concepts without percepts empty."

From Kant there is a more or less direct line to constructivist theories of knowing and learning—particularly the work of Jean Piaget and Ernst von Glasersfeld—that have become highly influential in contemporary education (see Richardson 2003) and actually have contributed significantly to the rise of the language of learning and the redefinition of teaching as the facilitation of learning (see also Biesta 2012a). The founding intuition of constructivism is that knowing and learning are processes in which knowers and learners actively construct their knowledge and understanding—they *make* sense—rather than that this should be understood as a process where knowers or learners passively receive such knowledge and understanding (for an overview see Roth 2011, particularly chapter 1). The more popular interpretation of this intuition is the suggestion that we can only learn, make sense, and understand *for ourselves*, and that no one else can do this for us. While this intuition is in itself correct, it does not resolve the underlying epistemological issues, as what we do 'for ourselves' can of course still be understood in terms of construction or reception. Nonetheless this cluster of ideas has strongly motivated the turn towards 'the learner' and his or her activities and has, in the same 'move,' discredited the idea of 'didactic teaching'—and perhaps of teaching altogether (on this problematic see Biesta 2012a).

I have no space here to go into epistemological detail, not only because of the complexity of the discussion, but also because the discussion is still ongoing, and because there is a body of work emerging that is actually challenging the constructivist 'hegemony' in education by highlighting, for example, that all knowing actually stems from a fundamental passivity and receptivity rather than that it is the result of the activity of an intentionally constructing mind (on this point see Roth 2011; for a wider overview of the discussion see Gordon 2012). What is important for the argument in this paper is that these different understandings of what it means to know are related to very different conceptions of what it means to be 'in' the world. They are related to very different modes of existing and thus open up very different existential possibilities. Let me briefly indicate the differences at stake.

The idea of knowledge as a process of construction comes with a conception of human existence akin to what I have said before about the 'act' of comprehension. Construction puts the knower-constructor at the centre of the world to be known, and thus puts the world—natural and social—in the position of object: an object of *my* construction, *my* understanding, and *my* comprehension. Existentially we can think of this as an act of mastery where through my act of knowing I try to master the world. This attitude is particularly visible in the technological engagement with the world. This means that in a very fundamental sense my existence 'occurs' before the existence of the world: I assume that I am there first in order then to start making sense of the world. It also means that I assume that the world exists *for* me, that is, that the world is in some way at my disposal as an object for me to make sense of and construct knowledge about. (Roth discusses this as the problem of 'intellectualism' of contemporary constructivism—see Roth 2011, pp. 5–10.)

To think of knowing as an 'event' of reception rather than as an 'act' of construction positions us very differently in relation to the world—and in a sense we could say that to

think of knowing as reception is exactly the opposite of thinking of knowing as construction. When we think of knowing as reception the world does not 'appear' as an object that is at our disposal but rather as 'something' that comes to us. Knowing then is not an act of mastery or control—our 'attitude' to the world, natural and social, is not technological—but can perhaps better be described as a process of listening to the world, of having a concern for the world, of caring for the world, and perhaps even of carrying (the weight of) the world. The most important differences here are between activity and passivity—or in slightly different terms: between intentionality and receptivity—and between the world as an object at my disposal (an object for me to do something with) and the world as an object with its own 'objectivity' or, with a slightly more precise word: its own 'integrity.'

Whereas construction and reception provide us with two different ways in which we relate to the world, it could be argued that they only differ in how we *relate*—as constructors or receivers—but that in both cases the assumption still us that we, in some sense, 'exist' before the world, so that from that position we can start to construct or receive. This suggests that there are at least further existential possibilities to consider in relation to how we understand ourselves and the world. If construction and reception both assume the existence of a 'self' who either constructs or receives, there is at least one other way of understanding the relationship between self and world, namely one where the world in a sense comes 'before' the self, and the self emerges from this 'encounter.' This is captured in an understanding of the self as a'response' to an address, a response to an experience of being addressed or being spoken to by what or who is other. It is particularly important here to ponder the difference between listening and being addressed. Whereas listening starts from the self who opens his or her ear in order to listen, the experience of being addressed comes from the 'outside' to us, so to speak, and in a sense 'asks' us to respond. Philosophically this way of understanding the relationship between self and world and the 'status' of the self within this relationship has particularly been articulated by Emmanuel Levinas (see, for example, Levinas 1978). (On the educational dimensions of the difference between 'listening' and 'being addressed' see also Biesta 2012b.)

There is, of course, much more to say about different understandings of knowing and different understandings of what it means to be 'in' the world. By indicating a number of possibilities I have at least tried to show that our being in the world can be understood differently. Such differences are not just theoretical but have important practical implications. Think, for example, of the way in which the technological attitude towards the world has not just generated many benefits, but lies also at the heart of many of the ecological problems we are currently facing. Similarly we can say that in the domains of our relationships with others—ethics and politics—an attitude of mastery and control will generate very different relationships than an attitude of listening, caring, or being spoken to. So what then, might all of this mean for education?

Teaching Without Learning: 'Adopting a Concept'

In the previous sections I have not only tried to show that the relationship between teaching and learning is not a necessary relationship. I have also tried to indicate that the ideas of learning and the learner are not without problems. This means that at the very least we should no longer assume that learning and being a learner are always just good and desirable. I have also shown how learning, understood as an 'act' of comprehension, puts us in a very particular relationship with the world and that other relationships are possible and perhaps desirable. Nonetheless learning plays a very central role in our understanding

of what education is about, so although one might be convinced at a theoretical level about some of the insights presented in the previous sections, there is still the question whether it is possible to take learning 'away' from education or, to put it differently, to teach without aiming for learning. In this section I wish to share some experience of a course I taught in which I did precisely that.

The course in question was a 2-week seminar for doctoral students in education and was organised around an exploration of seven key educational concepts taken from a book I had recently published (Biesta 2014). The concepts were creativity, communication, teaching, learning, democracy, emancipation and virtuosity. After an introduction we devoted a daily session to each of the concepts, exploring their history, their meaning and their significance and relevance. At one level I invited the students to explore connections between the concepts and their own research projects so that their understanding of the concepts could grow and deepen, and they might be able to incorporate some of these insights into their own work. This is a rather common way of proceeding at this level where the assumption is not that everything that is being discussed in the course will be relevant for what the students are doing.

But at that point I also reminded the students that education is perhaps not just about growing and deepening what is already there, but that education can also be understood as an encounter with something that is radically new, something that students precisely do *not* already have. Moreover, it is possible to think of education then as an encounter with something that comes to you without reason, so to speak, because if it is something that is really new, that really comes from the outside, students may not yet have any 'anchor points' for connecting with what is coming to them, and may therefore not (yet) be able to see the 'reason' of what is coming to them. The new that is coming to them may therefore be seen more as a burden that needs to be carried than as an insight that is already familiar and can just be added to what students already know and understand. I suggested to the students that something like this can happen in education as well, that is, that you encounter something that comes to you rather than that you 'go to it'—trying to grasp it, trying to understand it—so that it presents you with a burden you can either choose to carry with you for a while or not, and if you decide to carry it with you, you may over time develop a relationship with it and perhaps even a passion for it.

Against this background I introduced an additional 'organising principle' for the course, namely that of 'adoption,' as I felt that the idea of adoption came closest to this very different experience of encountering something that comes to you from the outside, as something strange over which you do not have much control or choice, but which, if you decide to stay with it, you may develop a relationship with. So instead of asking the students what is usually asked in courses like these, that is, to try to understand and make sense of the concepts under discussion and incorporate them into the 'reason' of their own research projects, I asked the students to *adopt* one of the concepts. And I meant this quite literally. I invited them to let one of the concepts into their lives. I asked them to live with one of the concepts for 2 weeks and, at the end of the 2 weeks, provide me and the other students with a report on the adoption experience, that is, a description of what it had meant to live with the concept for the 2 weeks. I did not ask them, therefore, to show their understanding of the concept—I did not ask for any comprehension—but tried to put them in a different existential 'position' vis-à-vis the concept.

I did not force the students to do so—at least I do not think I did—but did tell the students that if they were up for this experiment, then we should take the idea of adoption seriously from the start. To take adoption seriously meant first of all that the students would not be able to *choose* the concept they wanted, but should rather declare a

willingness to adopt one of the concepts and then see what would happen. After all, when you are willing to adopt a child, there is also little choice over the very child you adopt—also because, as with every child, you do not know what the child will become, which means that you take a responsibility upon you for something you cannot really foresee. At the end of the first session I therefore left little pieces of folded paper on a table with one of the concepts written on each of them and invited the students to pick one up and let this concept into their lives.

Almost all students did this—there was one student who already had set eyes on a particular concept, and I told the student that this was absolutely fine as well—and over the course of the 2 weeks we proceeded in a fairly conventional manner, exploring and discussing the intricacies and complexities of each of the concepts during our daily sessions. In the sessions we did work on questions of understanding and sense making—and in this sense the sessions were exercises in comprehension, one might say—although in the background of all this the students were carrying 'their' concept. I do not know all the detail of what happened with regard to this aspect of the course during the 2 weeks, but can give some reflections on the final session in which I asked the students to present their reports on the adoption experience—leaving it to the students to share as much or as little of the experience as they wanted.

It was first of all interesting to see that it wasn't easy for all students to just give up their identity as a learner—in the sense of learning as comprehension—and shift to a rather different way of being in relation to the course and its content. Several of the reports that the students presented were more 'traditional' attempts to make sense of the concept, to explore its meaning and significance, and said less about what it had meant to encounter the concept, to live with the concept, to carry the concept—in short: to exist with the concept. I pass no judgement on this, but just note that the identity of learning-as-comprehension appears to be very deeply entrenched in ourselves—perhaps also because we have invested quite a lot in this identity—so that to shift out of it is easier said than done. I have already hinted at the fact that I deliberately tried to take the moment of 'choice' out of the course by suggesting that the students would let a concept find them, rather than that they could choose the concept. In most cases students were open to this, except for the one student who had already set eyes on a particular concept. Again I do not wish to make any judgement about this, other than making the observation that 'choice' has also become a central part of the modern learner identity and therefore something that also requires some effort to let go of.

For most students, however, the concept had become a reality and the accounts they gave of both the initial encounter with 'their' concept and the subsequent time they spent with it were fascinating, and in some cases also deeply moving. Some students had encountered the concept that already very much was 'their' concept. For example, the student who had encountered the concept of emancipation told how the question of emancipation had always already been a major life-theme, so that encounter with the concept felt as a kind of affirmation of the presence and importance of this theme. Other students also spoke about the remarkable fit between themselves and the concept they had encountered. Yet for some students things worked exactly in the opposite direction, such as the student who had hoped all the time *not* to encounter the concept of 'learning,' yet this was the very concept that 'arrived.' This student recounted how she had put the concept—this little piece of paper—deep down in her backpack. But for the whole 2 weeks she could feel it sitting there, as a burden she had to carry and as something that wanted something from her. Another student told about a similar aversion at the moment of the encounter with the concept, and the difficulty in establishing a relation with the concept—the student

told that the concept was left downstairs during the night, but made its presence felt very strongly—although over time the relationship with the concept did change.

These examples not only showed that the concepts were not 'just' concepts and in many cases came to exist in the lives of the students as realities, as things cherished or hated, as things that called out to them, that addressed them, as things that wanted to have a place in their lives, albeit that for some students it was easier to accommodate them, that is to provide them with accommodation, than for others. What also happened in all these cases was that the encounter with the concept and the request to adopt the concept moved students beyond the traditional learner identity, moved them away from comprehension, to very different ways of being in and with the world. That comprehension became less central for the students was nicely demonstrated by a student who, when we had an informal gathering after the last session, asked me about something I had said earlier in the course. She prefaced her request by saying "I didn't really understand it, but I'm not really concerned about that" and then asked me just to repeat what I had said so that, I think, it could once more address her.

I wish to suggest that the students' experiences with the adoption were significant, not because they gained a deeper understanding of the concept, but because the request to adopt the concept opened up different existential possibilities for them, different ways of being in and with the world than the default mode of trying to understand the world. The request to adopt a concept asked the student to give up some control over the world. It asked them to let something into their lives about which they had little choice. And it asked them to take care of what came into their lives, even in those cases where they had no particular warm feelings and in some cases even a real dislike for what entered into their lives. By keeping the students away from comprehension—by asking them not to learn, not to interpret, not to make sense—it positioned the students very differently in the world and allowed them to experience a very different way of being, a very different way of existing. This was not only valuable in itself, but by interrupting the default tendency to comprehend, it also showed the students that learning is not the only meaningful way in which teaching can proceed and education can take place.

Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to argue that the relationship between teaching and learning is neither a necessary relationship, nor that it is always automatically a desirable relationship. I have also provided an example of what can happen if students are specifically asked to refrain from learning. All this is not meant to discredit learning or argue that there should be no place for learning in education. But I do think that it is tremendously important to 'free' teaching from learning, so to speak, and not simply to assume that 'learning' is the only possible and only meaningful response to or aim of teaching. Doing so is partly important in order to see that learning is a very particular, and in a sense limited way in which we can engage with the world, and partly in order to open up other existential possibilities for our students, other ways for our students to be in and with the world—particularly ways that allow for the world to encounter us and address us, so that it can appear in its own right rather that only as an object of our comprehension.

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