

Education as Iteration: More Than an Echo

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Jacques Derrida speaks of “iterability” throughout his works, but most particularly in “Signature Event Context,” to which John Searle responds in a text titled “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida.” “Limited Inc abc” is Derrida’s rejoinder. According to Gerald Graff, editor of *Limited Inc*, “iterability” is “Derrida’s word for the repeatability of the same expressions in different contexts (which for Derrida always involves transformation).”¹ In his essay, Harvey Shapiro specifically brings together iterability with education, or, more precisely, what he calls “the pedagogical mark.” From this stand, he sets out to examine three of “[Gert] Biesta’s recurring claims,” concerning students’ autonomy, students’ understanding-misunderstanding, and students’ invention. Shapiro acknowledges that Biesta is indeed “one of the more prolific scholars of Derrida’s deconstructive educational thought,” and thus he justifies choosing him as a “starting point” for his critique of all “proponents of deconstructive pedagogy” in general.

On this basis, Shapiro broadens his objections to all theorists of deconstruction in education and their interpretations of Derrida, focusing on five specific points, as summarized in his conclusion: (1) “the radical autonomy of the students”; (2) “the strict divergence of individual truths from one another”; (3) “an excessive displacement of the teacher by student interpretation”; (4) “the understanding-misunderstanding amalgam in student comprehension”; and (5) “a pedagogy of passive ... withdrawal in order to foster student invention.” These five points correspond to Biesta’s “three recurring claims” Shapiro identifies in his introduction as worth re-examining.

Within the constraints of this response, I cannot do justice to the several issues Shapiro addresses concerning “what is educationally at stake in Derrida’s ‘quasiconcept’ of iterability.” So I would like to return to what he places at the heart of his argument: what he calls the “pedagogical mark” and its iterability. In his introduction, he states: “In this essay, I will suggest what is educationally at stake in Derrida’s ‘quasiconcept’ of iterability”; and in his conclusion, he claims that “[t]he pedagogical mark’s iterability demands that teaching, like writing, ‘must continue to act’ in a perduring process of repeating and altering.”

What is a “pedagogical mark”? In Derrida’s work, “marks” are a kind of paradigm. Often, he speaks of “mark” rather than language. In a chain of “non-synonymous substitutions” Derrida “calls it ‘text,’ sometimes ‘writing,’ sometimes ‘trace,’ ‘supplement,’ ‘*différance*,’ ‘the remnant,’” and even “iterability.”² For Derrida, it is a structure to which he has given many names, a structure characterized by its ability to function in the absence of its creator. He writes:

If one admits that writing (and the mark in general) *must be able* to function in the absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production, etc. that implies that this power, this

being able to, this *possibility* is *always* inscribed, hence *necessarily* inscribed as *possibility* in the functioning or the functional structure of the mark ... [t]his possibility is a necessary part of its structure.³

What Derrida stresses heavily is that this possibility for a structure to function in the absence of its author or recipient and/or the context in which it was created, is inherent in the structure itself. If in this quote one replaces “writing” with “teaching” or “pedagogy,” “sender” with “teacher,” and “receiver” with “student,” the meaning becomes clearer in the educational context. This is where Shapiro sees “the most important implication of iterability for education” — it stresses “how ... teaching might function in the absence of the teacher.” Moreover, following Derrida’s logic of the “mark,” not only might “teaching ... function in the absence of the teacher,” but, in Derrida’s words, “this *possibility* is *always* inscribed ... a necessary part of its structure.”

Knowledge carries with it the possibility of being repeated, but at the same time, at each reiteration, in each new context, it is invented anew, “uncovered” in Joseph Hillis Miller’s term.⁴ It is not a repetition that would “parrot” or echo previously established traditions of knowledge. It would be a reiteration, which, in a new context, would bring differences to itself. In that respect, it bears the characteristics of iterability: repetition and alterity.⁵ However, teaching and learning occur at a particular time, in a particular context; at that time, at the time of their “inscription,” do teaching and learning “exhaust” themselves, or is there more to come, to “rise out of it”? If we bring Derrida’s argument about writing into the context of education, teaching and learning, we can see how teaching “is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which [the teacher’s] future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten.”⁶ If what is taught cannot but be repeated while it is altered, then what of students’ “autonomy” or “invention”? To what extent are they, as students, part of the “productive machine,” part of the iterability of the “pedagogical mark”? Or do they stand as “witness” only, albeit “witness of the witness”?⁷

Shapiro discusses what the concept of iterability means for the role of the teacher, and our conception of the nature of educational goals. For him, it is “clear” that “preparing for a teaching or learning experience” involves preparing for “becoming other,” and the iterability of the pedagogical mark “can provide a new way to consider the effect(iveness) of teaching.” But how? In light of iterability in education, is the goal of education what Shapiro believes it is, when he cites Samuel Weber: to provide students with capacities for “the uncanny recognition of something that, in being the same, reveals itself to be different”?

I would like to conclude this reflection on iterability and education with another quote from Weber: Teaching can be considered alive when it “names a movement in which life, paradoxically enough, is only rendered ‘present’ by expending itself, that is, by opening itself to a movement of iteration in which it is constantly being altered.”⁸

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 25. See also, Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Glyph 1* (1977): 172–198; and John Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph 1* (1977): 198–208.
 2. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 12.
 3. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 48, emphasis in original.
 4. Joseph Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009), 6.
 5. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 7.
 6. *Ibid.*, 8.
 7. Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, eds. Jacques Derrida, Thomas Dutoit, and Outi Pasanen (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), 67.
 8. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 66.