

## Contiguous Autism and Philosophical Advocacy: Socialization, Subjectification, and the Onus of Responsibility

Glenn M. Hudak

*University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

In this essay I plan to develop the concept and role of “philosophic advocacy” for educators as it pertains to how we might think differently about our *working-with* youth labeled autistic. Indeed, what does it mean to *work-with* autistic youth as a philosophical advocate?

To address this question I want to first “situate” advocacy within the context of education: its purpose and functions. Because as “feminist philosophers have long argued ... all knowledge is situated ... it adheres in social locations, and ... it is embodied.”<sup>1</sup> To “situate” advocacy then is to locate such activity within the life-world of experience, and where the advocate’s knowledge, understanding, and activity are constituted and coordinated within a specific social location/space, and whereby we may begin to employ the notion of a “situated” advocacy.

Next, I want to bring “situated advocacy” in line with Gert Biesta<sup>2</sup> who refines how we think about the purpose of education by positing three overlapping functions of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Qualification, providing students with knowledge, skills, training, and accompanying dispositions, “to do something” (*GE*, 19); socialization whose primary function is to include the student, as a “newcomer,” into the existing “social, cultural, and political orders” (*GE*, 20); and subjectification which focuses on becoming a subject and where this, “function might perhaps best be understood as the opposite of the socialization function. It is precisely *not* about the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into the existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders” (*GE*, 21). In short, subjectification is about freedom, emancipation, and “the kinds of subjectivity — or subjectivities — that are made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements” (*GE*, 21).

Taken together qualification, socialization, and subjectification collectively form a composite picture of the role and function of what “good education” might mean. Taken together they also “situate” advocacy within the role and function of education by providing a matrix that weaves advocacy into the demands generated from the specific location of qualification, socialization, and/or subjectification, noting that these three functions of education all overlap, as Biesta points out, like a Boolean diagram: they are intersectional. For purposes of this essay however, my primary focus will be on the subjective function of advocacy with a secondary focus on socialization. I do not want to disregard the importance of qualification, however with regards to working-with autistic youth my primary goals revolve around issues of inclusion, at this point. (With regard to qualification, I hope to work this aspect out in a later essay, bringing all three dimensions into the picture.)

Indeed, when we take into consideration the functions of socialization and subjectification in education we can detect two distinct, yet related, movements in

advocacy efforts to “include” autistic youth. The first movement is “interdisciplinary” as it revolves around the issues of socialization and the historic struggles to include the newcomer — autistic youth — *into* the existing school order, the rational community of speakers. While in the second movement, we note the “ironic” moment of subjectification, where advocacy efforts aimed at aiding autistic youth “ironically” transform, not the autistic youth but rather the advocate herself or himself, forming a unique space/location of subjectification: “contiguous” autism.

As such, I will begin in the first section by focusing on advocacy as a moment of socialization. In the second section I will focus on advocacy and subjectification. In both instances the central focus and concern will be grounded in the notion of a “presumption of competency” as this notion was central in “organizing” early efforts at a “philosophical” advocacy for autistic youth in schooling. Finally, I conclude by introducing the notion of contiguous autism.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL ADVOCACY AND SOCIALIZATION

The term “advocacy” commonly means: to “represent” another; to speak on another’s behalf, such as to represent in legal counsel; to “promote” action on behalf of a cause, such as to promote a political or pedagogical cause. In such cases the one who advocates gives aid to a desired cause, for a desired conclusion. So with regard to autistic youth, one can be a legal advocate, who represents youth in legal disputes over say discrimination and issues around access, a political advocate promoting more equitable rights and freedoms, and a pedagogical advocate providing aid and support for more inclusive pedagogical arrangements.

With regard to the “philosophical” dimension: it provides the educator with *conceptual motivation* to push beyond current ways of thinking about autism, such that, if we take the “philosophical” seriously then the onus of responsibility when in working-with autistic youth falls on us educators, to “include” autistic youth into the rational community. That is, within the context of advocacy-as-socialization, philosophical advocacy makes social, political, and pedagogical impediments objects of knowledge for the entire society to consider. Terms like “the presumption of competency” become used as “an object of general knowledge and thereby to awaken political consciousness to the distasteful prejudice called ‘ableism.’”<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of Biesta’s notion of socialization, philosophical advocacy for autistic youth does not happen in isolation from political, legal, and pedagogical efforts to include, *bring-into* the community autistic youth; it is woven into the collective fabric of social protest as a form of aid. To illustrate the multiple dimensions at work in the advocacy for autistic youth, I will provide a brief historical sketch focusing on the issue of “competency,” and the controversies surrounding the usage of “facilitated communication,”<sup>4</sup> and the philosophical impetus for a “presumption of competency.”

“Facilitated communication” was first used by Rosemary Crossley in Australia in the 1970s in her work with “nonspeaking people or people who have disordered speech because of autism and other developmental disabilities occurred by accident.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Crossley’s discovery — that those labeled as autistic have the

capacity to express themselves with the aid of facilitated communication — opened up new avenues of investigation not considered before, and with this remarkable discovery a new series of debates as to the competency of these individuals to speak on their own behalf ensued. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to go into details, it is worth noting that the controversies around facilitated communication in the United States revolved not only around educational matters but also more significantly around several prominent legal cases.

As Douglas Biklen and Donald Cardinal highlight, “court cases involving facilitated communication raise questions of representation in the most direct way. Will people with disabilities be permitted to represent themselves or will they be viewed as incompetent and thereby silenced in court?” (*RI*, 188). In the case of Luz P<sup>6</sup> for example, we read of a child age-eleven, “classified as autistic and mentally retarded, [and] could not speak.” While learning to type with the aid of a teacher in Orange County, New York, she alleged that her father was sexually abusing her. At the first court hearing the judge dismissed the case citing that facilitated communication was inadmissible as testimony in the case. The case eventually went before the appellate division of the State Supreme Court of New York where the court ruled that the question before the court was not the legitimacy of facilitated communication, which is to be determined by the scientific community, instead the question at hand is Luz P’s competency to communicate her testimony with a facilitator. The court’s ruling was that if Luz P could satisfactorily demonstrate that she has communicative competency to provide testimony then the court in this case would appoint a facilitator, an aid, to act as an interpreter (*RI*, 190). As the case moved forward Luz P was asked to demonstrate her ability to communicate through a series of tests; if she failed the tests, or failed to comply with the new ruling, the case would be dismissed.

Given what was at stake, Luz P was allowed to practice to improve her test performance. The court asked that in her practice and in her courtroom demonstration for competency, Luz’s facilitator was to be masked with headphones and white noise as to not hear the questions addressed to Luz P. However on the day that Luz gave her statement:

[T]he father’s attorney interrupted her testimony and demanded that Luz’s facilitator not look in the direction of the person asking the questions — the attorney worried that the person could read the lips of the person asking the questions — and not look at the keyboard. These requirements proved too much. Luz was unable to communicate under the changed condition.... The case was dismissed. The attorney for Luz’s father argued that her performance demonstrated that she was incapable of communicating. (*RI*, 190–191)

In this instance we detect the workings of power located in the very notion of the “competency” or “incompetency” of the witness to give testimony. Indeed, as Biklen and Cardinal write, “The most common assumption, or, “truth”, in disability research has to do with the idea of competence and incompetence ... [W]e must question these as any claims of truth, preferring instead a condition of uncertainty, fueled by competing discourses, competing truths” (*RI*, 196). We can note not only their efforts to provide competing discourses, competing truths, “truths” that are

grounded upon narratives provided by persons labeled autistic, but further to act as a philosophical advocate, challenging the “deficit” thinking with the notion of a presumption of competency.

In making “presuming competence” central to their efforts Biklen and Cardinal are challenging the dominant representation of people with developmental disabilities. Of import they make explicit, “Adopting the concept of ‘presuming competence’ places an onus of responsibility on educators and researchers to figure out how the person using facilitation, or any educational undertaking, can better demonstrate ability” (RI, 208). Indeed, Biklen and Cardinal make explicit that adopting the presumption of competency places an onus of responsibility on us, educators, to figure out how we can “better demonstrate ability” of autistic youth.

The very struggles revolving around facilitated communication led Biklen and Cardinal to counter the dominant narrative on autism by advocating for a “presumption of competency” when working-with autistic youth. By challenging the commonly held assumptions about autistic youth-as- “incompetent” they challenged educators to take up their “onus of responsibility.” From the perspective of socialization function of education then, the “onus of responsibility” in turn, brings together the legal, the philosophical, the pedagogical, and the political into a unified action where the “why” of our efforts and the “how” of our actions are in confluence, an *interdisciplinary moment*, and where the “philosophic” dimension of advocacy aims at generating new ways of thinking by providing counter-narratives, new conceptual “tools,” and new visions to include autistic youth within the existing order of schooling. Indeed, to push educators to be open-minded in our engagements, such that new conversations are possible, conversations that have been denied to a group historically marginalized — those labeled autistic.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL ADVOCACY AND SUBJECTIFICATION

Working-with autistic youth demands the philosophical advocate to take up one’s onus of responsibility, the rub however is that the onus of responsibility is not a one-dimensional, monolithic action. From the perspective of socialization, the onus of responsibility is interdisciplinary as it joins forces with other modes of advocacy such that new concepts and practices are generated to redefine and counter the dominant discourse, with the aim of including marginalized youth, and hence transforming the existing order itself.

From the perspective of subjectification, philosophical advocacy and the onus of responsibility embrace another dimension: a philosophical “irony,” where the more one aspires to take up their commitments, their responsibility, the less likely they are to grasp the meaning of their commitments and aspirations. Why? Because the very ideals embedded within one’s commitment to action “ironically” cannot contain its own aspirations.

Within this “ironic” moment, the act of taking up one’s responsibility *interrupts* the advocate’s world, placing her or him outside the rational community. That is, philosophical advocacy-as-socialization, as a composite, interdisciplinary action,

breaks down in the subjective moment — a sort of de-subjectification as composite advocacy unravels. Here the “philosophical” peels off, so to speak, from the composite action of aiding autistic youth, by making an “ironic turn” *away* from autistic youth and moving *toward* the unique role of the advocate. That is, with regard to subjectification, philosophical advocacy revolves around issues of uniqueness, presence, and, as Biesta argues, a “community” whose members have nothing in common with the rational community of schooling. “Here we are no longer within communities that have something in common; we are part of a community of those who have nothing in common — and it is precisely this condition that requires our unique, singular voice” (*GE*, 88). This ironic moment of commitment is for Jonathan Lear fundamental to the human condition and hence a fundamental philosophical activity, as it is the condition for singularity: a unique, singular voice.

Being both a conceptual and existential experience the ironic moment is vital to living a life of value, especially for one who strives for human excellence through a strong sense of commitment: one’s onus of responsibility. Conceptually, Lear sees the ironic moment bringing concepts and ideas to life, concepts that have been rendered to being slogans, clichés. One concept that has been rendered cliché is the concept of “irony” — ironically irony needs to be revitalized. Lear argues that irony has been drained of life and that the common usage of being ironic where one says the opposite of what they mean, or makes witty and sarcastic comments, completely misses the importance of irony for living a meaningful life. This draining of life from concepts Lear calls the “entropy of thought” where the danger is that “eventually the terms get used in place of thinking rather than as an expression of it ... The entropy of thought is ... endemic to thinking itself. Even the phrase, ‘entropy of thought’ can become cliché ... So the task for us is to bring concepts to life,”<sup>7</sup> that is, the task of the philosophical advocate.

As such, for Lear the philosophical then, “brings to life” that which is already here: preexisting concepts in such a way as to *bring* the concept alive: the concept is brought back to the living, us! Hence the ironic for Lear is also a form of subjectification, or perhaps a *re-subjectification*, in that irony brings concepts back to the living by rendering them unique to the human condition. Taken together we have another “sketch” of the philosophical, where the philosophical (as the “ironic moment” of bringing concepts to life) + advocacy (giving aid to a desired cause) = philosophical advocacy or giving aid to a desired cause by ironically bringing concepts to life/living.

Lear’s notion of the ironic is in part similar to Richard Rorty’s famous liberal ironist. The rub however is that for Lear, Rorty only presents a partial picture of the ironic moment — a *thin* version of the ironic moment. The part that Rorty gets right about irony, according to Lear, is the centrality of radical doubt about one’s practical identity. For Lear the complete picture of “irony has a two-part movement of detachment and attachment [and where] if one obliterates the second part of this two-part movement, all that remains is irony as a form of detachment.”<sup>8</sup> Here Lear is referring explicitly to Rorty’s ironist. While Rorty emphasizes the power of irony

as an uncanny moment of radical doubt that loosens our concepts from rigid moorings — setting them afloat with possibility — Lear asks, how does the ironist reattach — stitch together a committed stance?

For Lear irony is more than the activity re-description, indeed for him it is about taking one's practical identity seriously, *so* seriously as to lose one's understanding as to what it really means, say to be an advocate, presuming competency. That is, however one may re-describe being an educator conceptually, there is still the task of living-it; of living up to some ideal that shapes our sense of what it means to be a "good" advocate.

It is here that ironic moment takes a decisive "turn" away from Rorty. "Being human," for Lear, "is thus linked to a conception of human excellence; and thus becoming a human requires getting good at being human" (*CI*, 3). Concretely human excellence is located in our practical identity, "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life worth living and your action to be worth taking" (*CI*, 4). Irony shows its face when we arrive at a place in our lives where we are not "perfectly sure" what this practical identity means, and suddenly one finds that one's ideals are unable to provide guidance regarding how one should act next. Reflection will not be of help as Lear argues because irony is not a form of reflection; it is also not an existential crisis, where one's activities become meaningless. Indeed, and to the contrary, the ironic moment appears when one takes their practical identity seriously, very seriously. And where the tension is that the more committed one is to their practical identity, the more serious and attached they are to say, being an advocate, the less sure they are about what it means.

What seems to be occurring here, according to Lear, is that the practical identity of being an advocate for autistic youth carries with it a "pretense" that cannot be fulfilled. Lear uses pretense in the older sense of the word "of putting oneself forward or to make a claim ... it is a regular feature of pretense that, as we put ourselves forward in one way or another, we tend to do so in terms of established social understandings and practices. Our practical identities tend to be formulated as variations of available social roles" (*CI*, 10). Here, Lear brings out the ground of his argument, the "gap" that exists between the pretense of our practical identity and its aspiration:

[the aspiration] express what the pretense is all about but which seems to transcends the life and the social practice in which that pretense is made ... That is, in putting myself forward as [an advocate], or whatever the relevant practical identity, I simultaneously instantiate a determinate way of embodying the identity and fall dramatically short of the very ideals that have, until now assumed to constitute the identity. (*CI*, 25)

As with concepts, there exists the entropy of identity, a de-subjectification.

In other words, our practical identity falls short of its own internal pretense, and in doing so it grabs one, precisely because one has taken that practical identity so seriously that to question its meaning causes both disruption and disorientation. "This is the strangeness of irony: we seem to be called to an ideal that transcends our ordinary understanding, in the sense that something that has been familiar returns to

me as strange and unfamiliar” (*CI*, 22). And this strangeness disrupts my world, as I no longer know my way about, I am lost. And all familiar seems weirdly unfamiliar to me, and hence I am drawn unto myself — *alone in the presence of others*.

Here a philosophical advocate occupies a “strange” space where one realizes that in our striving for human excellence to be a “good” advocate working-with autistic youth, one’s world becomes strange, unfamiliar, again alone in the very presence of others. Such a space might be described by the classical Greek term, *autos*, from which the term autism is derived. *Autos* means: one’s true self, of oneself, of one’s own accord, to be with oneself among friends. That is, *autos* can mean being alone, unto oneself while in the presence of others.

It is in this moment, *autos*, that one is held responsible by one’s own aspirations, while simultaneously not knowing the pretense, the way to put oneself forward, the claim to make in one’s actions. Within this strange “autistic” space, the philosophical advocate has a “breakdown in practical intelligibility.” Indeed, this ironic moment calls into question the very nature of “commitment” itself as one wonders who precisely is coming to the aid of whom? As such, and at this moment, when advocacy is lived as an “ironic existence,” the philosophical advocate “presumes” competency when working-with autistic youth rather than “assuming” it. That is, by working-through this strange “autistic” space, the philosophical advocate re-attaches to their commitments by bringing to life the decomposed material of previously held social roles available to one, their practical identity, such as being an advocate. As such, the philosophical advocate “presumes” — believes but defers final judgment say about the competency of autistic youth — rather than “assuming” it, and *hence allows one to be alone in the presence of another as a form of human excellence; a practical identity* that has been interrupted and thus has the potential to interrupt the normal order of the rational community in one’s effort to aid.

Indeed, if as Biesta argues, “a pedagogy of interruption is, therefore, a pedagogy that aims to keep the possibility of interruptions of the ‘normal’ order open,” (*GE*, 91) then the one who is interrupted within the realm of subjectification here is the advocate herself or himself. Another way of saying this is that within the realm of the rational community speakers/advocates are interchangeable — thus, any competent lawyer could advocate for Luz P. With regard to subjectification, however, as one steps outside the rational community of speakers, the “philosophical” advocate occupies a “unique” space, an “autistic” space, alone in the presence of others. And where the onus of responsibility demands that the advocate transform herself or himself because, “first and foremost [uniqueness is] a way of responding, a way of taking up a responsibility that, in a sense, is demanded by the situation we are in ... there is no way in which someone else can take up this responsibility for us” (*GE*, 89). In this scenario then, when the philosophical advocate presumes competency, it is no longer a case of speaking and listening within the rational community but rather a quality of being alone in the presence of another, “contiguous autism.”

## CONTIGUOUS AUTISM

Working-through both the conceptual and the existential dimensions of philosophical advocacy, via subjectification, has led me to the notion of “contiguous autism.” That is, when we, educators, embrace say, the presumption of competency a twofold event happens simultaneously: first our practical understanding of what it means to be an educator is radically called into question (what am I supposed to do?): the *detachment* from commitment. And second, we enter a “unique” dialogical space whereby we are placed in proximity to different worlds, different language games, and indeed a unique way of standing-with youth: being alone in the presence of others: a “contiguous autistic” space, the *re-attachment* of commitment-without-commonality. Within this strange “autistic” space, the philosophical advocate reattaches to their commitments, bringing “to life” the decomposing material of previously held social roles, their practical identity as an advocate.

Taken together, I ponder a moment of advocacy that is distinct from overt action, one that requires our capacity to “stand-with” with others. That is, from the perspective of subjectification the focus of philosophical advocacy is not the autistic youth who is commonly seen in need of help or special support. But rather, “the educator her/himself. [Indeed] what should be transformed then [is] not so much the incurable child, but precisely the way of relating and the language used by the educator to approach the situation.”<sup>9</sup> Why? Because what is signified within the discursive space of contiguous autism “cannot be grasped by existing ideologies, ways of behaving or traditional discourses.”<sup>10</sup> As such, philosophical advocacy here is more about searching for “refuge or asylum than searching for a language — or better a non-language — which allows autistic children in their own singular way without having their existence reduced to a psychological theory or educational insight.”<sup>11</sup> Hence philosophical advocacy from the perspective of subjectification brings forward the limits of theorizing autistic youth! Indeed, with the imperative, the onus of responsibility to transform ourselves.

At this point we begin to realize that the notion of a common ground in advocacy efforts ironically undermines its own efforts, hence problematizing the notion of inclusion itself. The notion of contiguous autism is intended to address this, for as Simon Critchley states, “the thought of contiguity suggests the idea of different entities being in contact, in proximity to each other, without merging or blending into one another or becoming a whole ... not with the intention of producing some overarching dialectical synthesis, but rather the truth emerges in a non-univocal manner ... as that space.”<sup>12</sup> Here we notice distinct language games, distinct worlds living contiguously, and hence being inclusive without a common ground.

Indeed, and along these lines of thinking, Gert Biesta argues against an “imperialistic” notion of inclusion, which simply brings more people into the existing order through the efforts of diversity. Instead, he counters this with a notion of inclusion as “the inclusion of what cannot be known to be excluded in terms of the existing order, the inclusion of the incalculable” (*GE*, 125). Is not the inclusion of the incalculable precisely the ironic moment when in our strongest efforts to aid, to advocate, become strange to us? *Autos*? Is not the inclusion of the incalculable,



an asylum<sup>13</sup> then, an autistic space where the philosophic advocates can stand-with autistic youth, without imposing a common ground?

- 
1. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 22.
  2. Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010). This work will be cited as *GE* in the text for all subsequent references.
  3. Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 8.
  4. Douglas Biklen, "Communication Unbounded: Autism and praxis." *Harvard Educational Review* 60, no. 3 (1990): 291–314; and Douglas Biklen and Donald Cardinal, "Reframing the Issue: Presuming Competence," in *Contested Words, Contested Science: Unraveling the Facilitated Communication Controversy*, eds. Biklen and Cardinal (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); this work will be cited as *RI* in the text for all subsequent references.
  5. Biklen, "Communication Unbounded," 293.
  6. Cited in *RI*.
  7. Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action* (New York: Other Press, 2003), 34.
  8. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 39. This work will be cited as *CI* in the text for all subsequent references.
  9. Jan Masschelein and Pieter Verstrate, "Living in the Presence of Others: Towards a Reconfiguration of Space, Asylum and Inclusion," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 16, no. 11 (2011): 10.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Ibid.
  12. Simon Critchley, "The Overcoming of Overcoming: On Dominique Janicaud," *Continental Philosophy Review* 36, no. 4 (2003): 440.
  13. See Masschelein and Verstrate, "Living in the Presence of Others."