for the opportunity she provided to reflect on Levinas and pedagogy. I wish to thank Jim Garrison for our conversations about pragmatism, including the ones that helped me to see some of its limits and limitations, and Sam Rocha for important feedback on my reflections on teaching and transcendence. Working with Charles Bingham has substantially deepened my understanding of the educational significance of the work of Jacques Rancière, particularly in relation to questions about emancipation. Chris Higgins provided me with an opportunity to explore the work of Hannah Arendt in more depth. I would like to thank him, Wouter Pols, and Joop Berding for comments that helped me to deepen my ideas about education and political existence. Wouter Pols, Carlo Willman, and Janet Orchard provided opportunities for developing my ideas about teaching and teacher education. Many of the ideas in this book were also discussed with students and colleagues at the University of Stirling and at Örebro University and Mälardalen University. Tomas Englund has been a wonderful host during my visiting professorship at Örebro University, while Carl Anders Sifström has provided me with a very stimulating environment during my visiting professorship at Mälardalen University. Finally, I would like to thank Jason Barry and Dean Birkenkamp at Paradigm Publishers for their confidence in this project and for their ongoing support.

I dedicate this book to those who have taught me.

This book is about what many teachers know but are increasingly being prevented from talking about: that education always involves a risk. The risk is not that teachers might fail because they are not sufficiently qualified. The risk is not that education might fail because it is not sufficiently based on scientific evidence. The risk is not that students might fail because they are not working hard enough or are lacking motivation. The risk is there because, as W. B. Yeats has put it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility. Yes, we do educate because we want results and because we want our students to learn and achieve. But that does not mean that an educational technology, that is, a situation in which there is a perfect match between “input” and “output,” is either possible or desirable. And the reason for this lies in the simple fact that if we take the risk out of education, there is a real chance that we take out education altogether.

Yet taking the risk out of education is exactly what teachers are increasingly being asked to do. It is what policy makers, politicians, the popular press, “the public,” and organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank increasingly seem to be expecting if not demanding from education. They want education to be strong, secure, and predictable, and want it to be risk-free at all levels. This is why the task of schooling is more and more being constructed as the
effective production of pre-defined “learning outcomes” in a small number of subjects or with regard to a limited set of identities such as that of the good citizen or the effective lifelong learner. It is also why there is a more general push for making education into a safe and risk-free space (see Stengel and Weems 2010). What should have been a matter of degree—the question, after all, is not whether education should achieve something or not, or whether educational spaces should be safe or not, but what education should achieve and to what extent this can be pre-specified, and what kind of safety is desirable and at which point the desire for safety becomes uneducational—has turned into an “either-or” situation in which the opportunity for teachers to exercise judgment has virtually disappeared.

The risk aversion that pervades contemporary education puts teachers in a very difficult position. While policy makers and politicians look at education in the abstract and from a distance and mainly see it through statistics and performance data that can easily be manipulated and about which one can easily have an opinion, teachers engage with real human beings and realize at once that education cannot be “fixed” that simply—or that it can only be “fixed” at a very high price. The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is in a sense an attempt to wish this reality away. It is an attempt to deny that education always deals with living “material,” that is, with human subjects, not with inanimate objects. The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is an attempt to forget that at the end of the day education should aim at making itself dispensable—no teacher wants their students to remain eternal students—which means that education necessarily needs to have an orientation toward the freedom and independence of those being educated.

Surely, it is possible to make education work; it is possible to reduce the complexity and openness of human learning—and one could even say that the educational practices and institutions that have been developed over the centuries do precisely that (see Biesta 2010a). But such complexity reduction always comes at a price, and the moral, political, and educational question is, What price are we willing to pay for making education “work”? This is partly a pragmatic question, as it has to be addressed in relation to the question, What do we want education to work for? (see Biesta 2010b). But it always also involves careful judgment about the point where complexity reduction turns into unjustifiable and uneducational suppression and where suppression turns into oppression. To simply demand that education become strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free, and to see any deviation from this path as a problem that needs to be “solved,” therefore misses the educational point in a number of ways.

One has to do with the attitude expressed in the desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free. The French educationalist Philippe Meirieu has characterized this attitude as infantile (see Meirieu 2008, p. 12). He argues that to think that education can be put under total control denies the fact that the world is not simply at our disposal. It denies the fact that other human beings have their own ways of being and thinking, their own reasons and motivations that may well be very different from ours. To wish all this away is a denial of the fact that what and who are other to us are precisely that: other. It thus exemplifies a form of magical thinking in which the world only exists as a projection of our own mind and our own desires. Education is precisely concerned with the overcoming of this “original egocentrism,” not by overriding or eradicating where the child or student is coming from but by establishing opportunities for dialogue with what or who is other (see ibid., p. 13). And a dialogue, unlike a contest, is not about winning and losing but about ways of relating in which justice can be done to all who take part.

To demand that education become strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free also misses the educational point in that it seems to assume that there are only two options available for education: either to give in to the desires of the child or to subject the child to the desires of society; either total freedom or total control. Yet the educational concern is not about taking sides with any of these options—which reflect the age-old opposition between educational progressivism and educational conservatism—or about finding a happy medium or compromise between the two. The educational concern rather lies in the transformation of what is desired into what is desirable (see Biesta 2010b). It lies in the transformation of what is de facto desired into what can justifiably be desired—a transformation that can never be driven from the perspective of the self and its desires, but always requires engagement with what or who is other (which makes the educational question also a question about democracy; see Biesta 2011b). It is therefore, again, a dialogical process. This makes the educational way the slow way, the difficult way, the frustrating way, and, so we might say, the weak way, as the outcome of this process can neither be guaranteed nor secured.

Yet we live in impatient times in which we constantly get the message that instant gratification of our desires is possible and that it is good. The call to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is an expression of this impatience. But it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what education is about and a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes education “work.” It sees the weakness of education—the fact that there will never be a perfect match between educational “input” and “output”—only as a defect, only as something that needs to be addressed and overcome, and not
also as the very condition that makes education possible (see also Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2006). It is this misguided impatience that pushes education into a direction where teachers' salaries and even their jobs are made dependent upon their alleged ability to increase their students' exam scores. It is this misguided impatience that has resulted in the medicalization of education, where children are being made fit for the educational system, rather than that we ask where the causes of this misfit lie and who, therefore, needs treatment most: the child or society. The educational way, the slow, difficult, frustrating, and weak way, may therefore not be the most popular way in an impatient society. But in the long run it may well turn out to be the only sustainable way, since we all know that systems aimed at the total control of what human beings do and think eventually collapse under their own weight, if they have not already been cracked open from the inside before.

The chapters in this book, therefore, come to education from the angle of its weakness. In them I try to show how, for what reasons, and under what circumstances the weakness of education—the acknowledgment that education isn't a mechanism and shouldn't be turned into one—matters. This book is not an unbridled celebration of all things weak, but an attempt to show, on the one hand, that education only works through weak connections of communication and interpretation, of interruption and response, and, on the other hand, that this weakness matters if our educational endeavors are informed by a concern for those we educate to be subjects of their own actions—which is as much about being the author and originator of one's actions as it is about being responsible for what one's actions bring about.

Such an orientation toward the child or student as a subject in its own right is, of course, not all that matters in education. As I have argued elsewhere in more detail (see Biesta 2010b), there are (at least) three domains in which education can function and thus three domains in which educational purposes can be articulated. One is the domain of qualification, which has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions. The second is the domain of socialization, which has to do with the ways in which, through education, we become part of existing traditions and ways of doing and being. The third is the domain of subjectification, which has to do with the interest of education in the subjectivity or "subject-ness" of those we educate. It has to do with emancipation and freedom and with the responsibility that comes with such freedom. The weakness of education is at stake in all three dimensions, but how much we value this weakness depends crucially on the extent to which we believe that education is not just about the reproduction of what we already know or of what already exists, but is genuinely interested in the ways in which new beginnings and new beginners can come into the world (see Biesta 2006a; Winter 2011). Such an orientation, therefore, is not just about how we can get the world into our children and students; it is also—and perhaps first of all—about how we can help our children and students to engage with, and thus come into, the world.

In the seven chapters that follow I explore the weakness of educational processes and practices from a range of different angles and in relation to a number of key educational themes. The themes I have chosen are creativity, communication, teaching, learning, emancipation, democracy, and virtuosity. I start, in Chapter 1, with the theme of creativity. While much work on creativity focuses on the ways in which education might foster the creativity of students, I approach the question of educational creativity from a different angle. On the one hand I am interested in education as itself a creative process—that is, as a process that creates; on the other hand I am interested in how we might best understand what it means to create, and more specifically, what it means to see education as a process that in some way contributes to the creation of human subjectivity. Taking inspiration from the work of John Caputo, I make a distinction between two understandings of creation: strong metaphysical creation and weak existential creation. While the first has had a dominant influence on Western ideas about what it means to create—both in secular and in religious discourses—Caputo shows, through a reading of the creation stories in the book of Genesis, that the act of creation can be—and in a sense ought to be—understood outside of the domain of omnipotence, strength, and metaphysics. It is the weak understanding of creation that I bring to bear on the question of human subjectivity through an engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Here subjectivity is not understood as an essence but as an event, and thus as something that can only be captured in existential and, therefore, weak terms. Doing so allows me to show how the weakness of education matters for what, to me, indeed lies at the heart of any educational endeavor, which is the emergence of human subjectivity.

As education is at heart a dialogical process, I focus, in Chapter 2, on the theme of communication. In the first part of the chapter I discuss how communication has been understood and theorized in the work of John Dewey, both at a general level and with regard to educational processes and practices. Unlike the sender-receiver model that still seems to inform much commonsense thinking about communication—in education and elsewhere—Dewey provides a conception of communication as a meaning-generating process where things are literally made "in common" through interaction and participation. Such an understanding of communication-as-participation has important implications for education, both at the micro-level of the communication of meaning in classrooms and schools and at the macro-level of the interaction.
but it is important to see them for what they are, that is, normative judgments about desirable change, not descriptions of inevitable natural processes. To see learning as something constructed and artificial makes it possible to expose the political “work” done through the idea of “learning,” something that I discuss in terms of the “politics of learning.” Against the background of an analysis of the politics of learning that is at work in contemporary discussions about lifelong learning, I show how the idea of learning as something natural runs the risk of keeping people in their place. This is why in the later parts of the chapter I turn to the theme of emancipation in order to explore whether it is possible to think of emancipation outside of the confines of a certain politics of learning. With Foucault I explore the emancipatory potential of the ideas of resistance, interruption, and transgression in order to highlight the need for resisting the idea of the learner identity as a natural and inevitable identity and for interrupting the current “common sense” about learning.

From these more fundamental questions about teaching and learning I turn, in Chapter 5, to what is perhaps one of the most difficult educational questions, namely, the question whether, and if so how, education can contribute to the freedom of the human subject. This is the theme of emancipation. I discuss aspects of the philosophical and educational history of the concept of emancipation in order to highlight a common thread in the modern understanding of emancipation where emancipation is seen as a “powerful intervention” from the outside in order to set someone free. In the chapter I not only raise a number of questions about this particular understanding of emancipation—questions that reveal an underlying “colonial” way of thinking in the modern “logic” of emancipation—but also outline a different understanding of emancipation. In this conception, which is informed by the work of Jacques Rancière, equality is not seen as an “end-state” to be achieved at some point in the future, but rather functions as an assumption that requires verification; that is, it requires to be “made true” through our actions in the here and now. Such an understanding of emancipation is no longer based on (the possibility of) a “powerful intervention” from the outside but rather occurs in events of subjectification, when individuals resist existing identities and identity-positions and speak on their own terms.

The question of emancipation so conceived is not only an educational question but is at the very same time a political question. That is why, in Chapter 6, I connect it to the theme of democracy. My discussion partner in this chapter is Hannah Arendt. Arendt’s work poses a real challenge to anyone who is interested in the relationships between education and democracy, as she has been one of the most outspoken critics of the idea that education and politics may have anything to do with each other. She takes the view that the
realm of education should be “divorced” from all other realms, and most of all from the realm of political life. In the chapter I show that Arendt’s arguments for this position are based on a psychological understanding of education, one that assumes that the only available vocabulary for education is that of development, preparation, identity, and control, so that notions like action, plurality, subjectivity, and freedom only begin to matter once children have gone through a particular developmental trajectory that makes them “ready” for democratic politics. Using some of Arendt’s own arguments, I show that once we overcome such a psychological view of education it becomes possible to reveal the intimate connection between education and democratic politics. Using Arendt’s understanding of freedom as “being-together-in-plurality” I argue that such freedom cannot be “produced” educationally but can only be achieved politically. This provides the starting point for an understanding of democratic education that is neither psychological nor moral, but rather thoroughly educational.

In Chapter 7, the final chapter of the book, I return to teaching and the teacher through a discussion of the theme of virtuosity. Against the idea of teaching as a science-based or evidence-based profession, but also against the idea of teaching as a matter of competence and competencies, I develop the idea of teaching as virtue based. Against the background of a critical analysis of recent policy and theory around teacher education I raise the question whether teaching should be understood as an art or a science. After briefly considering the problems with the idea of education as a science with the help of William James, I turn to Aristotle’s distinction between poiesis (“making action”) and praxis (“doing action”) in order to argue that the more important question is not whether teaching is an art or a science, but what kind of an art teaching actually is. While to some extent and in some respect there may well be a production dimension to teaching, I argue that teaching is never exhausted by the idea of production—not in the least because as teachers we never produce our students; they are always already there as human subjects in their own right. The educational question is therefore never just about how to do things, but always involves judgments about what is to be done—the question of educational desirability—and this locates education firmly within the domain of praxis. The distinction between poiesis and praxis helps us to see that teachers do not just need knowledge about how to do things (technē) but also, and most of all, need practical wisdom (phronēsis) in order to judge what needs to be done. Teachers therefore need not simply to be competent, but also to be educationally wise. Such wisdom is to be understood as a “quality” of the person. Aristotle calls this quality arete (ἀρετή), which can be translated as “character”—in the sense of a way of being and acting that characterizes the person—or also as “virtue.” With a play on the latter word I then suggest that teachers need educational virtuosity: the ability to make situated judgments about what is educationally desirable.

In the Epilogue I bring the main threads of the book together in an argument for a pedagogy of the event, a pedagogy that favors existence over essence, weakness over strength, praxis over poiesis, and thus a pedagogy that is willing to engage with the beautiful risk inherent in all education worthy of the name.
communication across differences. The main message that follows from Dewey's practical view of communication—communication as something we do—is that the starting point for communication lies in participation, that is, in doing things together. Dewey also shows, however, that it is the quality of participation that counts, which means that only forms of participation in which all have an interest and a stake have the potential to contribute to the ongoing creation of a shared world (which, to make the point one more time, is not a world in which everyone has an identical outlook but a world in which everyone can take part in their own ways). As I have mentioned before, this is not something that can easily be realized, but Dewey at least provides us with a criterion to distinguish between "real" and "pseudo" participation.

While Dewey thus makes an important contribution to understanding communication in a weak, open, and risky way—not only at the general level of the theory and philosophy of communication but also in relation to educational communication—I have indicated that there is at least a philosophical problem with Dewey's approach that has to do with its metaphysical character and, more specifically, with the fact that communication figures as an original and self-sufficient "presence" from which everything else emanates. I have tried to make clear that this is not just a philosophical problem but one that potentially has practical implications as well. The main tension here is between the communicative intent or ethos of Dewey's philosophy—his insistence that communication is an open and generative process, a process of doing things together so as to make things in common—and the particular way in which Dewey theorizes communication. The danger here, to put it briefly, is that this theory becomes a template for how communication should proceed and thus begins to close the very things it aims to open up. This is why, with Derrida, I have suggested that the communicative ethos of Dewey's philosophy needs to be approached in a deconstructive way, not only at the level of communication itself—which, if we follow Dewey, has to be understood as a process that is always already "in deconstruction"—but also with regard to the theory and philosophy of communication that we can find in Dewey's writings.

Chapter Three

Teaching

Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.

—Emmanuel Levinas

To suggest that education operates by means of communication is, in itself, not really contentious. It is quite obvious that when education happens it happens through communication—which does not necessarily mean that it happens through spoken or written words alone. Things become already a bit more interesting when we raise the question of how communication actually "works," and in the previous chapter I have shown that it makes all the difference whether we think of communication in logistical terms—that is, in terms of the transportation of chunks of information from A to B—or whether we think of it as a generative process of participation through which things—in the widest sense of the word—are made "in common." The latter view depsects educational communication as an open process and therefore as a process that always entails a risk. To take the risk out of communication would mean to turn it back into a form of transportation where communication would lose its dialogical potential, that is, its ability to do justice to all who take part. The question as to what it means to do justice to all who take part in communication is not a question that can simply be resolved at the level of theory—it is not a matter of just having the "right" theory—which means that we ultimately also need to risk our theories of communication themselves.

While the deconstructive pragmatism that follows from these considerations provides important markers for educational processes and practices,
there is one conclusion that explicitly should not be drawn from the foregoing
exploration of the role of communication in education, which is the suggestion
that because education operates through communication, communication is
education. Being involved in collective meaning making, even being involved
in collective learning, is not automatically a case of education. There are a
number of reasons for this—and some of these I have explored elsewhere,
particularly in relation to the difference between learning and education (see
Biesta 2006a, 2010b), an issue to which I will return in the next chapter. In
this chapter I will focus on one particular aspect of the discussion, which has
to do with teaching and the role of the teacher. Starting from the assump-
tion that teaching is a necessary component of all education, I will explore
what this means for our understanding of teaching and the teacher. Against
the idea of the teacher as a fellow learner or a facilitator of learning, I will
suggest that we should understand the teacher as someone who, in the most
general sense, brings something new to the educational situation, something
that was not already there. That is why I will suggest that teaching cannot
be entirely immanent to the educational situation but requires a notion of
“transcendence.”

To think about teaching in terms of transcendence suggests that teaching
can be understood as a gift or as an act of gift giving. I argue, however, that
we shouldn’t think that it lies in the power of the teacher to give the gift of
teaching—and it is precisely here that we can find a weak “moment” in (our
understanding of) teaching. This is why I explore the question of the gift of
teaching and teaching as a gift from the other side of the spectrum, that is,
in terms of what it might mean (and how it might be possible) to receive the
gift of teaching. In relation to this I highlight the importance of the distinc-
tion between “learning from” and “being taught by” and suggest that it is the
latter idea that might help us to reclaim teaching for education or, as I put it
below, to give teaching back to education.

**Constructivism and the End of Teaching**

If there is one idea that has significantly changed classroom practice in many
countries around the world in recent decades, it has to be constructivism. For
constructivism to have had such an impact, it necessarily had to become theo-
retically multiple and open. Thus the constructivist classroom takes inspiration
from a range of different—and to a certain extent even conflicting—theories
and ideas, such as the radical constructivism of Ernst von Glasersfeld, the
cognitive constructivism of Jean Piaget, the social constructivism of Lev Vygotsky,
and the transactional constructivism of John Dewey. What unites these
approaches—at least at a superficial level—and thus generally characterizes the
constructivist classroom, is an emphasis on student activity. This is based on the
assumption that students have to construct their own insights, understandings,
and knowledge, and that teachers cannot do this for them. In the constructivist
classroom, therefore, constructivism operates not just as a learning theory or an
epistemology, but also, and first and foremost, as a pedagogy. Virginia Richard-
son has correctly pointed out that “constructivism is a theory of learning and
not a theory of teaching” (Richardson 2003, p. 1629). This not only means that
constructivist pedagogy is not simply the application of constructivist learn-
ing theory—Richardson goes even further by arguing that “the elements of
effective constructivist teaching are not known” (ibid.)—but also implies that
a belief in constructivist learning theory does not necessarily require that one
adopt a constructivist pedagogy. After all, “students also make meaning from
activities encountered in a transmission model of teaching” (ibid., p. 1628).

Although constructivism is first of all a theory of learning, the uptake of
this theory in schools, colleges, and universities has led to a change in practice
that is often characterized as a shift “from teaching to learning.” Barr and
Tagg (1995) have made the even stronger claim that what is at stake here is
a Kuhnian paradigm shift from what they refer to as the “instruction para-
digm” to the “learning paradigm.” The point of using these phrases is not to
suggest that under the instruction paradigm there was no interest in student
learning whereas under the learning paradigm there is. The point for Barr and
Tagg—and for the many others who have made similar observations so as to
create a present-day “common sense” about education—is that in the instruc-
tion paradigm the focus is on the transmission of content from the teacher
to the student, whereas in the learning paradigm the focus is on the ways in
which teachers can support and facilitate student learning. This is in line with
Richardson’s description of constructivist pedagogy as involving “the creation
of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are grounded in a
constructivist theory of learning, with goals that focus on individual students
developing deep understandings in the subject matter of interest and habits of
mind that aid in future learning” (Richardson 2003, p. 1627).

The shift from teaching to learning—a shift that is part of a wider
“learnification” of educational discourse and practice (see also Chapter 4)—
has radically changed common perceptions of what teaching entails and of
what a teacher is. Constructivist thinking has, on the one hand, promoted the
idea of teaching as the creation of learning environments and as facilitating,
supporting, or scaffolding student learning. On the other hand it has, in one
and the same move, discredited the “transmission model of teaching” and
thus has given lecturing and so-called didactic teaching a really bad name. Constructivism seems, in other words, to have given up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and that students have something to learn from their teachers. If I see correctly this has even led to a certain embarrassment among teachers about the very idea of teaching and about their identity as teachers. This is, perhaps, what concerns me most, because if we give up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and make them into facilitators of learning, we do, in a sense, give up on the very idea of education.

The issue that interests me in this chapter, therefore, has to do with the impact of constructivist thinking (conceived in the broad sense outlined above) on teaching. I am interested in its impact not only on the practice of teaching but also on the role of the teacher, the identity of the teacher, the justification of the teacher "position," and even on the very idea of teaching and the very idea of the teacher. The question I wish to address is what it might take to give teaching a place again in our understanding of education, that is, to give teaching "back" to education. And the thesis I wish to explore is whether it might be that case that the idea of teaching only has meaning if it carries with it a certain idea of "transcendence," that is, if we understand teaching as something that comes radically from the outside, as something that transcends the self of the "learner," transcends the one who is being taught.

**CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY, IMMANENCE, AND THE LEARNING PARADOX**

The reason why teaching—or a certain conception of teaching that is not about the facilitation of learning—seems to have dropped out of the equation has to do with the fact that constructivism sees the process of learning as immanent. Although this already creates problems for constructivism as a theory of learning, it becomes even more of a problem when constructivism gets translated into a pedagogy and becomes part of a theory of education, as one could argue that the very point of education is precisely not to repeat what is already there but to bring something new to the scene. This is, of course, an old discussion in the educational literature, one that goes straight back to Plato’s *Meno*, to Socrates, and to the learning paradox—and many authors do indeed conceive of Socrates and Plato as "the first constructivists in education" (Nola and Irzik 2005, p. 105) or, to be more precise, as the first ones enacting a constructivist pedagogy.

The learning paradox is the predicament posed by *Meno* as how one can go looking for something when one doesn’t know what one is looking for, and how one can recognize what one is looking for if one doesn’t know it. *Meno* poses the question as follows, "And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?" Socrates then reformulates the problem as follows, "I know, *Meno*, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that a man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire." Socrates’ way out of the learning paradox is to argue that all learning is a matter of recollection. This is why he can deny that he has anything to teach and is involved in teaching. It is also why he represents his educational efforts as entirely maieutic: bringing out what is already there.

It is not too difficult to see the connection with constructivism, not only in terms of the theory of learning but also with regard to the vanishing role of the teacher. But whereas Socrates says that he is not involved in any teaching and by doing so even wishes to deny the very possibility of teaching, this is not consistent with what he actually does. Sharon Todd, whose argument I follow here, argues in her book *Learning from the Other* that Socrates “cannot simply be taken at his word” (Todd 2003, p. 23) and shows, through a subtle reading of the *Meno*, that there is actually quite a lot of teaching going on in the way in which Socrates tries to convince *Meno*’s slave boy that he already possesses the knowledge he did not realize he possessed. Todd particularly

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1. I wish to emphasize that the phenomenon that forms the occasion for my reflections in this chapter is the way in which, through references to constructivist ideas and intuitions, the idea of teaching—and hence the idea of the teacher—seemed to have changed its meaning to such an extent that the teacher has become at most a facilitator of learning and in some cases just a fellow learner. I am therefore neither analyzing nor criticizing constructivist ideas themselves but am interested in the way in which certain conceptions of constructivism—which obviously also include misconceptions—have contributed to what we might call the demise, the disappearance, of, or in a more post-modern mode, the end or even the death of the teacher. For a recent critical discussion of the idea of constructivism see Roth (2011).

2. Nola and Irzik (2005) do, however, note that while Plato and Socrates can be seen as the first enacting a constructivist pedagogy, they do not hold a constructivist theory of knowledge.

highlights the teaching performed by Socrates that has an impact on the slave boy’s identity, a process through which the slave boy is being taught that he is indeed a slave boy, and also the process through which the slave boy is being taught that he is a learner, that is, a “subject of pedagogy” (ibid., p. 24). Todd thus presents Socrates as “the teacher, who, like the perfect murderer, makes it appear that teaching has not taken place, who leaves the scene without a trace, and who, moreover, is convinced of his own innocence” (ibid.). She adds, however, that by proclaiming his questions to be innocent, Socrates actually “obscures the fundamental structures of alteration and asymmetry that are present between teacher and student” (ibid., p. 25).

Todd’s reading provides support for the suggestion that the idea of teaching only has meaning if it carries with it a notion of “transcendence,” that is, if it is understood as something that comes from the outside and adds rather than that it just confirms what is already there. Her argument also shows that the shift from teaching to learning is in a sense ideological, in that it hides the teaching that goes on under the name of Socratic questioning. To highlight what I see as the transcendent dimension of teaching, Todd turns to Levinas, who indeed makes the claim that “teaching is not reducible to maieutics [but] comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain” (Levinas 1969, p. 51). Todd explains that the view of teaching as bringing more than I contain “is antithetical to the Socratic method that so predominates dialogical approaches to educational practice, where teaching is viewed as ‘bringing out of the I that which it already contains’” (Todd 2003, p. 30). This is why she concludes that “the maieutic model erases the significance of the Other and claims that learning is a recovery contained within the I, rather than a disruption of the I provoked by the Other in a moment of sociality” (ibid.).

Todd’s argumentation makes an important contribution to understanding the significance of the idea of transcendence in teaching. Yet there are two aspects that, in my view, need expansion. One is relatively minor. Todd focuses her argument strongly on the idea of “learning to become”—a notion inspired by Sigmund Freud and Cornelius Castoriadis. While “becoming” may be part of what happens as a result of learning, I do not think that it is the only thing that matters in education—and to a certain extent I would even want to question the suggestion that we need to learn in order to become (see also Chapter 4). This is why I would disagree with the statement from Castoriadis, quoted by Todd, in which he argues that “the point of pedagogy is not to teach particular things, but to develop in the subject the capacity to learn” (Todd 2003, p. 19). I would like to place a stronger emphasis on the “act” of teaching and take a broader view of what the purposes of teaching can be (see also Biesta 2010b, chapter 1), which for me would include the teaching of “particular things.”

The more important issue, however, has to do with the way in which the notion of “transcendence” figures in the discussion—and my point here is not to criticize Todd but to notice the particular use of this notion and then make a suggestion to take this a step further. What is interesting about Todd’s discussion is that with Levinas, she does indeed engage explicitly with the idea of “transcendence.” Yet this transcendence is always brought back to—or perhaps we could say contained within—the idea of the Other, understood as “a specific, embodied individual” (Todd 2003, p. 47, note 1). While Todd emphasizes that what Levinas means by the Other is neither simply “a sociological ‘Other’ who is marginalized or maligned” nor “another person who, as a subject, resembles myself,” and while she quotes Levinas in saying that “the Other is what I myself am not” (ibid., p. 29), the Other that transcends the self, either as teacher or as another from whom we can “learn to become,” only seems to figure in the discussion as a human other. The issue I wish to raise here is not whether this, in itself, poses a problem—one could even argue that this is precisely what is distinctive about Levinas’s notion of transcendence (see below). The issue is rather whether, when we say that the other is what I myself am not, this otherness can be contained to concrete and identifiable other human beings, or whether we should be open to the possibility that something more radically different might break through. The question here is, therefore, how we might think transcendence, which, as I will suggest, also raises the question how we might transcend thinking—particularly the thinking of what “is” transcendental. It is to this question that I now turn.

THINKING TRANSCENDENCE, TRANSCENDING THINKING

My guide in extending the idea of transcendence a little is a recent book by Merold Westphal (2008) called Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue. In the book Westphal brings the ideas of these two thinkers “in conversation” precisely around the theme of transcendence (see also Henriksen 2010). One of the central claims of the book is that both for Levinas and for Kierkegaard transcendence involves more than only the otherness of other human beings. Yet while Levinas and Kierkegaard agree “that the transcendence and alterity that deserve to be called divine are not to be found in the realm of theoretical knowledge [but] occur in the centering of the cognitive self by a command that comes from on high,” they disagree “in that Levinas insists that the
neighbor is always the middle term between me and God, while Kierkegaard insists that it is God who is always the middle term between me and my neighbor" (ibid., p. 5).

In the first two chapters of his book Westphal discusses this through the notion of "revelation." What is interesting for the discussion is that Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, explores the idea of revelation through a discussion of the *Men*o, focusing on the question whether it is possible to think of teaching outside of, and different from, the idea of maimetics (see Kierkegaard 1985). Whereas the maieutic conception of teaching sees teaching as accidental to learning, Climacus asks, by way of a "thought-project" (ibid., p. 9), "what would have to be true if there were to be an alternative to Socrates’s account of knowledge as recollection, if the teacher were really to teach so that the relation to the teacher would be essential rather than accidental" (Westphal 2008, p. 25). The answer Kierkegaard develops is that the teacher not only needs to give the learner the truth but also needs to give the learner the "condition of recognizing it as truth," because "if the learner were himself the condition for understanding the truth, then he merely needs to recollect" (ibid., p. 25; see also Kierkegaard 1985, p. 14). This "doubly true giving" is what Climacus characterizes as *revelation*. Revelation therefore means not merely "that the teacher presents the learner with some knowledge not already possessed, but more importantly, also [with] the condition for recognizing it as truth," as it is only in the latter case that "the relation to the teacher becomes essential" (Westphal 2008, p. 25; emphasis added).

Climacus helps us see that a notion of teaching that is essential rather than accidental to learning is not simply about presenting students with something they do not yet know. It rather is about presenting students with something that "is neither derivable from nor validated by what [they] already know" (ibid., p. 26) but that truly transcends what they already know. As Westphal explains, "For both Kierkegaard and Levinas the knowledge that deserves to be called revelation is independent of the "already saids" that are the condition for our recognition of the truth as such" (ibid.). This is why Levinas writes that Socratic teaching is characterized by the "primacy of the same," that is, "to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside" (Levinas 1969, p. 43). In contrast to this, Levinas is after a relationship in which I receive from the other "beyond the capacity of the I"—which not only means "to have an idea of infinity" but also means "to be taught" (ibid., p. 51). And it is this teaching that can be called *revelation* (ibid., p. 67).

Westphal notes that both Levinas and Kierkegaard link the notion of revelation to that of *authority*. After all, if teaching is about presenting students with something that is "neither derivable from nor validated by" what they already know, then they have to take it on the authority of the teacher. The wider significance of this insight lies in the fact that, as Westphal puts it, "for both Levinas and Kierkegaard the basis of the ethical and religious life lies in an authoritative revelation that in its immediacy comes to us beyond our own powers of recollection" (ibid., p. 26). In the 1965 essay "Phenomenon and Enigma" (Levinas 1987), Levinas refers to this revelation as "enigma" in order to highlight that what is revealed is not a phenomenon, not something that is comprehensible and can be comprehended by me, but rather something that is "beyond" my cognition and comprehension—and therefore not even "beyond being" (ibid., p. 62) and "beyond reason" (ibid., p. 61). Enigma is about a way of "manifesting oneself without manifesting oneself," as Levinas puts it. It stands for that which "signifies itself without revealing itself" (ibid., p. 73). It is about God who literally "comes to mind" (Levinas 1998a), rather than a mind trying to comprehend God.

Westphal shows that with the idea of "enigma" Levinas is both arguing against a logocentric reason that "arbitrarily excludes God from its world" and thus is "dogmatically atheistic" and a logocentric reason that "domesticates God by transforming the divine into a (visible or intelligible) phenomenon"—a process in which "the divinity of God dissipates" (Westphal 2008, p. 31). The latter point explains why Levinas’s emphasis on the other—one, above, I have referred to as the *human* other—does not exclude the possibility of "further" or "other" transcendence, so to speak. What Levinas wants to prevent is the situation in which (knowledge of) God gets in the way of my hearing the other—which, unlike Kierkegaard, he sees as a bigger problem than the option where the other would get in the way of my seeing God (see ibid., p. 53). This is what Westphal refers to as the idea of the ethical as "the teleological suspension of the religious" (ibid., p. 47). Suspension here is not to be understood as a reduction of the religious to the ethical, but as a negation of its claim to autonomy and self-sufficiency. That is why Westphal writes that "teleological suspension does not eliminate; it relativizes" (ibid.).

Westphal provides a strong argument, based on his reading of Levinas’s essay "God and Philosophy" (Levinas 1998a, pp. 55–78), why transcendence matters for *philosophy*. Central to the argument is Levinas’s critique of the idea that philosophy "has a monopoly on meaning and intelligibility" (Westphal 2008, p. 59). To make this point, Levinas stages a distinction between the God of the Bible—whom he positions as a God who transcends philosophical thought—and the God of the philosophers. While philosophy, for example in the form of what Levinas calls "rational theology," tries to capture the meaning of God by pulling God into the domain of being—thus denying and
even destroying the very possibility of transcendence (see Levinas 1998a, p. 56)—Levinas tries to keep a place for a meaning “beyond being” (ibid., p. 57). This does not require that philosophy bring the idea of transcendence within its thought—because by doing that, transcendence would be pulled back into a confined domain of meaning-as-being—but rather requires that philosophy be transcended, that it is interrupted, that its fundamental incompleteness is exposed. Philosophy might try to open itself for such an interruption, although there cannot be any guarantee of success, of course, as an interruption that really interrupts always arrives unexpected, as a thief in the night. Philosophy might also deny the need for transcendence and shield itself off for any possible interruption, thus trying to maintain its self-chosen self-sufficiency. While philosophy might perhaps be forgiven for such a strategy, I do not think that this is a viable option for philosophy of education—if, that is, philosophy of education does not wish to collapse into a philosophy of learning in which teaching has no place. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, the educational interest is, after all, an interest in the coming into the world of what is uniquely and radically new, which means that philosophy of education must always make place for that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility, that which transcends the realm of the possible.

**RECEIVING THE GIFT OF TEACHING**

The argument so far suggests that if teaching is to have a meaning beyond the facilitation of learning, if it is essential rather than accidental to learning, then it has to come with a notion of “transcendence.” It has to be understood as something that comes from the outside and brings something radically new. This is what we can find in Climacus’s idea of teaching as “double truth giving,” and in Levinas’s understanding of teaching as a relationship in which I receive from the other “beyond the capacity of the I.” It is important to note, however, that both Climacus and Levinas are not so much saying that teaching is possible; they are rather inquiring into the meaning of teaching and into its conditions. Climacus is actually rather quick to assert that when we move from the hypothetical question as to what would have to be true “if the teacher were really to teach so that the relation to the teacher would be essential rather than accidental” (Westphal 2008, p. 25) to the question whether the teacher is actually capable of double truth giving, that this capacity lies beyond the powers of the teacher. He explicitly states that “the one who not only gives the learner the truth but provides the condition [for understanding it as truth] is not a teacher” (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 14). While Climacus acknowledges that “all instruction depends on the presence of the condition [so that] if it is lacking, a teacher is capable of nothing” (ibid.,), he argues that “no human being” is capable of transforming the learner in such a way that the learner comes in the possession of the condition for understanding the truth as truth (ibid.). If such a transformation is to take place, Climacus therefore concludes, “it must be done by the god himself” (ibid., p. 15).

While Climacus approaches the question of teaching from the perspective of the teacher—and thus comes to the conclusion that the double truth giving that characterizes teaching is a gift that lies beyond the capacity of the teacher—Levinas engages with the question of teaching from the other end of the spectrum, that is, from the perspective of the one who is receiving from the other “beyond the capacity of the I.” As I have mentioned, Levinas characterizes this experience as the experience of “being taught.” The language is of crucial importance here because, so I wish to suggest, the experience of “being taught by” is radically different from the experience of “learning from.” When students learn from their teacher, we could say that they use their teachers as a resource, just like a book or like the Internet. Moreover, when they learn from their teachers, they bring their teachers and what their teachers do or say within their own circle of understanding, within their own construction. This means that they are basically in control of what they learn from their teachers.

My point here is not to suggest that there is no place for such learning from teachers—although it does raise the question why in that situation we would still use the word teacher and not, for example, a word such as resource. My point rather is that to learn from someone is a radically different experience from the experience of being taught by someone. When we think, just at the level of “everyday phenomenology,” of experiences where we were taught something—where we would say, always in hindsight, that “this person has really taught me something”—we more often than not refer to experiences where someone showed us something or made us realize something that really entered our being from the outside. Such teachings often provide insights about ourselves and our ways of doing and being—in- sights that we were not aware of or rather did not want to be aware of. They are inconvenient truths or, in the words of Deborah Britzman, cases of “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998).

While Levinas appears to be less radical than Climacus in that, unlike Climacus, he considers it possible that we can be taught by our teachers, the juxtaposition of Climacus and Levinas is nonetheless important as it helps to make clear that the experience of being taught, the experience of receiving the gift of teaching, is not an experience that can be produced by the teacher—which means that the teacher’s power to teach is a weak, existential power, a power that relies on interaction and encounter and not a strong, metaphysical
power. In precisely this sense Derrida's observation that to give a gift "is to give something that you don't have" (Derrida, quoted in Caputo and Vattimo 2007, p. 135) is entirely correct where it concerns the gift of teaching. Whether someone will be taught by what the teacher teaches lies beyond the control and power of the teacher (see also Saeverot 2011), which doesn't mean, though, that it doesn't matter what the teacher does (see below). Looking at teaching and being taught in this way, we might even say that in this precise sense the identity of the teacher has to be understood as a sporadic identity, an identity that only emerges at those moments when the gift of teaching is received. It is not an identity that can be claimed by the teacher; it is not an identity that can be in the teacher's secure possession. It rather is a possibility to reckon with, a possibility to work with in our lives as teachers. Calling someone a teacher is therefore ultimately not a matter of referring to a job title or a profession, but is a kind of compliment we pay when we acknowledge—and when we are able to acknowledge—that someone has indeed taught us something, that someone has indeed revealed something to us and that therefore we have been taught.

4. I would like to thank Jeroen Lutters for this insight. Note that to pay this compliment is not meant as a return of the gift of teaching; it is not a "payback."—see also note 5 below.

In objective truth, the accent falls on the objective contact of what you say (which Climacus calls the "what"), so that if you get the objective content right ($2 + 3 = 5$) you are in the truth, no matter whether you are, in your personal subjectivity, a villain or an apostle. Nothing prevents a famous mathematician from being an ethical scoundrel. The existential subject is accidental and remains a disinterested spectator. But in subjective—or "existential" truth, the accent falls on what Climacus calls the "how," on the way the subject lives, the real life and "existence" of the subject. Here, where "subjectivity is truth," the subject is essential and passionately involved. In this case, even if what is said is objectively true—that God is love—if you are not subjectively transformed by that, if you do not personally have love in your heart, then you do not have the truth.... The difference is between having an idea of the "true God" and having a "true relationship to God." Here the how of the relationship is all. (Emphasis in original)

Looking at the experience of being taught in this way also makes it possible to give the idea of authority (again) a place in our understanding of teaching. The events of 1968 have clearly shown what the problem is with authority that is authoritarian, that is, authority that is nothing but the unwarranted exercise of power. Such authority is actually unable to work educationally, as it operates on a denial of the subjectivity of those who are subjected to such authority. But just as authoritarian education is and ought to be an oxymoron, so is anti-authoritarian education, that is, education that, in the words of A. S. Neil (1966), conflates freedom with license, and assumes that the promotion of freedom means that anything should go. As I have hinted at in the Prologue, the educational question—unlike the learning question—is not about doing what you want to do but requires engagement with the difference between what is desired and what is desirable. The educational question, in other words, is about what it is that we want to give authority to; it is about deciding what it is that we want to have authority in our lives. To receive the gift of teaching, to welcome the unwelcome, to give a place to inconvenient truths and difficult knowledge, is precisely the moment where we give authority to the teaching we receive. In this sense—and presumably only in this sense—can
the idea of authority have a meaningful place in education (see also Meirieu 2007; Bingham 2009)."

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has been motivated by a very concrete and practical concern about the disappearance of teaching and the demise of the role of the teacher as someone who has something to say and something to bring. This, as I have shown, is not merely a theoretical or philosophical discussion but is having a real impact on common perceptions about teaching and even on the self-perception of teachers. In response to this I have argued that if teaching is to be more than just the facilitation of learning or the creation of learning environments, it needs to carry with it an idea of transcendence. I have not only tried to make clear what "kind" of transcendence is needed. I have also tried to indicate what it means to think transcendence consistently, which, as I have suggested, is not merely a matter of thought or comprehension but also entails taking the idea and possibility of revelation seriously, as both a religious and a secular concept. In doing this I have tried to suggest that transcendence cannot be contained to the other as another human being. As soon as one brings transcendence in, one has to take it seriously all the way down—or perhaps we should say all the way "up."

While this does suggest that the idea of teaching, if it is to have any meaning beyond the facilitation of learning, needs to come with a notion of "transcendence," it does not mean that the teacher can simply and unproblematically occupy such a position of transcendence. (As I have highlighted, the power to teach is the very thing that is not in the possession of the teacher.) One reason for this lies in the fact that teachers can never fully control the "impact" of their activities on their students. In this regard—and here lies a connection to the discussion of the theme of "communication" in the previous chapter—the educational "project" always needs to engage with its own impossibility (see Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2001; Biesta 2004a; Green 2010; Gough 2010) and thus needs to proceed with a sense of irony, that is, with a sense of disbelief in itself, a sense of powerlessness or weakness. The other, perhaps more important reason has to do with the fact that claiming a position of transcendence runs the risk of turning educational authority into educational authoritarianism, which would block the very education one aims to bring about.

This is why I have approached the question of teaching from the perspective of the experience of "being taught," which, as I have emphasized, is fundamentally different from the experience of "learning from." While in the situation where students learn from their teachers, the teacher figures as a resource so that what is being learned from the teacher is within the control of the student, the experience of "being taught" is about those situations in which something enters our being from the outside, so to speak, as something that is fundamentally beyond the control of the "learner." To be taught—to be open to receiving the gift of teaching—thus means being able to give such interruptions a place in one's understanding and one's being. This is why, following Kierkegaard, such teachings, when they are received, are a matter of subjective truth, that is, of truth to which we are willing to give authority.

Does the fact that teachers cannot produce the experience of "being taught" mean that teachers can do nothing in this domain other than hope for the best? I do not think that this is the conclusion that necessarily follows. One thing that teachers and those who have a concern for teaching can do is to resist and interrupt the constructivist "common sense" about teaching (see also Chapter 4)—a "common sense" in which the teacher is the one who has nothing to give and is giving nothing, who is there to draw out what is already inside the student, who is there to facilitate students' learning rather than to teach them a lesson, who is there to make the learning process as smooth and enjoyable as possible, who will not ask difficult questions or introduce difficult knowledge, in the hope that students will leave as satisfied customers. There is, after all, a different story to tell about teaching, and it is important that this story is being told and enacted—both within the school and within society. This is a story where teachers are not disposable and dispensable resources for learning, but where they have something to give, where they do not shy away from difficult questions and inconvenient truths, and where they work actively and consistently on the distinction between what is desired and what is desirable, so as to explore what it is that should have authority in our lives. And this is not only a question at the level of individual students and their desires, but also has to do with the public role of the teacher (see Meirieu 2008), so as to (re)connect the project of schooling with the wider democratic transformation of individual "wants" into collectively agreed upon "needs" (see Heller and Fehér 1989; Biesta 2011b).

Just as there is a need to tell and enact a different story about teaching and the teacher, there is also a need to tell and enact a different story about

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5. It is important to note that to give authority to the teaching we receive should not be understood as the point where we "return" the gift of teaching, where we pay for what is given to us, so as to annul the gift and turn it into an economy (see Derrida 1992b).
the student, a story where the student is not a student-consumer whose needs need to be met in the most effective way, but a student who is open to the gift of teaching, a student who can welcome the unwelcome, a student who does not limit himself or herself to the task of learning from the teacher but is open to the possibility of being taught. To open oneself for such a possibility begins, perhaps, by acknowledging that the school is not and should not be understood as a place for learning—if one wishes one can, after all, learn anywhere—but that what makes the school a school is the fact that it is a place for teaching, as this is what is distinctive about the school compared to most if not all social institutions, settings, and arrangements. To enter the school on the assumption that one may not only learn but perhaps even be taught may only be a very small shift, but it is nonetheless a crucial and necessary shift if our aim is to give teaching its proper place in education or, to put it differently, if our aim is to give teaching back to education.

Chapter Four

Learning

To live, by definition, is not something one learns. —Jacques Derrida

So far I have discussed three educational themes—creativity, communication, and teaching—and in each case I have highlighted weak dimensions and elements in order to show that such dimensions are not accidental—they are not a defect, to put it differently—but that they are essential to what it means to create, to communicate, and to teach. To create, to communicate, and to teach are thus not to be understood as processes that can be controlled by the creator, the communicator, or the teacher. Precisely in this sense they always entail a risk. Engaging with this risk—and perhaps we could even say, embracing the risk—is what makes such processes educationally relevant and significant. It gives them an educational “force,” albeit not a strong metaphysical force but rather a weak existential force. In this chapter I turn to the theme of learning. While some people would see this as the central theme in any discussion about education, I have, over the years, become increasingly concerned about the language and discourse of learning (see Biesta 2006a, 2010b; see also below). In my more radical moments I sometimes even think that learning is the last thing that educators should be concerned about—and the distinction between “learning from” and “being taught by” that I introduced in the previous chapter provides perhaps some reason for this suggestion.

In this chapter I therefore come to the theme of learning from a rather critical angle. The main “target” for my critique is the suggestion that learning is something natural, something we cannot not do. Against the idea that learning is something natural, I argue that learning is something constructed—that
when we refer to something as “learning” we are not engaged in a description of a naturally occurring phenomenon but are actually making a judgment about change. Such judgments are important in educational settings—which is one of the reasons why, as I will explain below and have argued before, the language of learning is unhelpful as an educational language—and it is important to see them for what they are, that is, normative judgments about desirable change, not descriptions of inevitable natural processes. To see learning as something constructed and artificial makes it possible to expose the political “work” done through the idea of “learning,” something I will explore in more detail in terms of what I will refer to as the “politics of learning.” Against the background of an analysis of the politics of learning that is at work in contemporary discussions about lifelong learning, I show how the idea of learning as something natural, something we cannot not do, runs the risk of keeping people in their place. This is why in the later parts of the chapter I turn to the theme of emancipation in order to explore whether it is possible to think of emancipation outside of the confines of a certain politics of learning. With Foucault I explore the emancipatory potential of the ideas of resistance, interruption, and transgression in order to highlight the need for resisting the idea of the learner identity as a natural and inevitable identity and for interrupting the current “common sense” about learning.

My attempt to denaturalize the idea of learning—that is, to take it out of the domain of inevitability and necessity—can be understood as an attempt to take the strength out of the idea of learning, not only in order to show that it is a more complicated and contentious notion than many would believe but also to show that learning is not something that has power over us—something to which we should subject ourselves—but rather something that we should have power over. To take the strength out of the idea of learning is therefore another contribution to the exploration of the weak dimensions of education.

**LEARNING, LEARNING, LEARNING**

In the preambule to his book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida writes that “to live, by definition, is not something one learns” (Derrida 1994, p. xviii). If this is indeed so, and if it is so by definition, then the following lines, taken from the preface of UNESCO’s report from the 2010 *Shanghai International Forum on Lifelong Learning*, may perhaps sound a little “out of joint.” They read,

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 Veldes-Cotera 2011, p. v)

Claims like these—which almost sound like threats: You will not be able to meet life challenges unless you become a lifelong learner! Society will not be sustainable unless it becomes a learning society!—have become all too familiar in recent times, so that it may well be argued that we now live in a “learning age” (which incidentally was the title of a UK government consultation paper from 1998 that even promised “a renaissance for a new Britain”—see Department for Education and Employment 1998).

In the learning age we are surrounded by claims that learning is something good and desirable, and often by claims that it is *inextricably* good and desirable. We are also surrounded by claims that learning is something inevitable, something we *have* to do and cannot *not* do, and therefore as something that should not only take place in schools, colleges, and universities but actually should go on throughout our lives, both extended in time (the idea of lifelong learning) and extended in space (the idea of life-wide learning, that is, learning that permeates all aspects of our lives). But is learning indeed the “treasure within”—as was suggested in the title of the 1996 UNESCO report written by Jacques Delors and colleagues (Delors et al. 1996)? Is learning indeed inevitable? Is it indeed an “unavoidable biological fact” that we learn as we breathe, all the time, without giving it any thought? (Field 2000, p. 35)? Is learning therefore indeed something that should permeate our lives, from dust to dawn, from cradle to grave, from womb to tomb? And is it therefore entirely reasonable to have European Lifelong Learning Indicators that measure in extreme detail how “well” each and every European country and within each country ultimately every individual is doing in its learning (see ELLI Development Team 2008)?

In this chapter I raise a number of critical questions about the “learning age,” that is, about the apparent omnipresence of learning in our times and our lives. These questions partly have to do with *discourse*, that is, with the discourse of learning and its problems. They partly have to do with *power*, that is, with the ways in which through the discourse of learning power is being exercised. And they have to do with *resistance*, that is, with the question whether we should resist the “demand” for learning and, if so, how we might be able to do this. I come to these questions as an educator and educationalist, as I think that the language of learning has been utterly unhelpful in the double educational task of engagement with and emancipation from the world, both
the material and the social world (on this formulation of the “task” of education see, for example, Meirieu 2007). The analytical and critical “device” I will use in this chapter is the idea of the “politics of learning,” through which I will highlight the powerful work that is being done by and at the very same time hidden behind the discourse of “learning.” I will develop my ideas in five steps. I will start with the discourse of learning, indicating, on the one hand, the ongoing “learnification” of the discourse of education and highlighting, on the other hand, some problems with the very idea of “learning.” Against this background I then look at shifts in the “field” of lifelong learning (and here we should note that to name this “field” in terms of learning is already part of the problem) in order to explore some aspects of a politics of learning that is working through it. I will then make some suggestions for how we might resist the tendency to naturalize learning—that is, to put it on an equal footing with breathing and digestion—both at the level of theory and the level of practice. From there I turn to the question of emancipation in order to explore how we might think of and “do” emancipation outside of the confines of a politics of learning. What such an emancipation-without-learning might look like is something that, in the fifth step, I illustrate through the work of Foucault. After this I will make some concluding remarks to draw the lines of my argument together.

**THE PROBLEM WITH “LEARNING”**

Since the 1990s the word learning has become a popular concept in educational research, policy, and practice. Elsewhere (Biesta 2010b) I have characterized the rapid increase in the use of the word learning and the rise of a wider “language of learning” as the *learnification* of educational discourse and practice. This process is visible in a number of discursive shifts, such as the tendency to refer to education as “teaching and learning,” to refer to students as “learners” and to adults as “adult learners,” to see teachers as “facilitators of learning,” and to conceive of schools as “learning environments” or “places for learning”—the latter being the phrase used to designate Watercliff Meadow, a primary school in Sheffield, allegedly because the word *school* had such a negative connotation with pupils and parents. The shift from “adult education” to “lifelong learning” is another prominent manifestation of the rise of this “new language of learning” (Biesta 2006a).


The rise of the “new language of learning” is the result—and perhaps we should say the partly unintended outcome—of a number of developments. These include (1) the impact of new theories of learning, particularly constructivist theories, that put the focus more strongly on students and their activities than on teachers and their input; (2) the (postmodern) critique of authoritarian forms of teaching; (3) what John Field (2000) has called the “silent explosion” of learning, that is, the fact that more and more people are engaged in more and more different forms and modes of learning, particularly nonformal and informal ones; and (4) the individualizing impact of neoliberal policies and politics on education, including adult education (a point to which I will return). The rise of the language of learning has, in some cases, empowered those at the receiving end of the spectrum, particularly where teaching was conceived in narrow, controlling, and authoritarian ways. But the rise of a language of learning has also had some less desirable consequences. These consequences have to do with two aspects of the concept of “learning,” one being that “learning” is a process term, and the other that “learning,” unlike “education,” is an individualistic and individualizing term.

To begin with the first point: in the English language “learning” generally denotes a process or an activity. This means, however, that the word *learning* is in itself neutral or empty with regard to content, direction, and purpose. To suggest that learning is good or desirable—and thus to suggest that it is something that should go on throughout one’s life or that should be promoted in schools—does therefore not really mean anything until it is specified what the *content* of the learning is and, more important, until it is specified what the *purpose* of the learning is. This emptiness of the notion of “learning” has made its rise in educational settings quite problematic, as the point of education—be it school education or the education of adults—is never just that students learn, but that they learn *something* and that they learn this for particular *reasons*. The language of learning has made it far more difficult to engage with the question of purpose to the extent that in many instances this question has virtually disappeared from the discussion (see Biesta 2010b). The fact that “learning” is an individualistic and individualizing term—learning is, after all, something one can only do for oneself; it is not possible to learn for somebody else—has also shifted attention away from the importance of *relationships* in educational processes and practices and has thus made it far more difficult to explore what the particular responsibilities and tasks of educational professionals such as teachers and adult educators actually are.

As soon as it is acknowledged that the question of learning always raises further questions about its purposes, we can, on the one hand, begin to ask what desirable purposes of learning might be, while, on the other
hand, we can begin to see the particular purposes that are being promoted in policies and practices for lifelong learning. With regard to the first issue it has been known for a long time in the field of adult education that the learning of adults is not one-dimensional but can serve a range of different purposes. Aspin and Chapman (2001) helpfully make a distinction between three different agendas for lifelong learning: lifelong learning for economic progress and development; lifelong learning for personal development and fulfillment; and lifelong learning for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity (see Aspin and Chapman 2001, pp. 39–40). As I have already mentioned earlier in this book, I have elsewhere (Biesta 2010b) proposed a distinction between three domains of educational purpose: the domain of qualification, which has to do with the ways in which, through education, individuals become qualified to do certain things (this is the domain of the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions); the domain of socialization, which has to do with the ways in which, through education, individuals become part of existing social, political, professional, and so on “orders”; and the domain of subjectification, which, in opposition to socialization, is not about how individuals become part of existing orders but how they can be independent—or as some would say, autonomous—subjects of action and responsibility. While qualification and socialization can contribute to the empowerment of individuals in that it gives them the power to operate within existing sociopolitical configurations and settings, subjectification has an orientation toward emancipation, that is, toward ways of doing and being that do not simply accept the given order but have an orientation toward the change of the existing order so that different ways of doing and being become possible. (I return to this below.)

The problem with the language of learning, therefore, is that it tends to obscure crucial dimensions of educational processes and practices—that is, aspects of content, purpose, and relationships. This means not only that the language of learning is a very unhelpful language in the field of education (and there is indeed evidence that this is impacting negatively on the ability of teachers to engage with the normative and political dimensions of their work; see, for example, Biesta 2010b, p. 4)—which is why I have coined the ugly word learnification to highlight this—but also that it is obscuring the political “work” that is done with and through the language of learning. To this issue I will now turn.

THE POLITICS OF LEARNING

While there are many examples of the learnification of educational discourse in the domain of school, college, and university education, the “field” where this has happened most explicitly and most extremely is that of lifelong learning. As I have indicated, the very fact that this field is now being called lifelong learning already highlights the impact of the language of learning on this domain. While the interest in the “lifelong” dimension has been around for a long time—for example, in the work of Basil Yeoxxec in Britain and Eduard Lindeman in the United States (both in the 1920s)—the idea of “lifelong” has for a long time been connected to the notion of education (the title of Yeoxxec’s book from 1929 was indeed Lifelong Education) and not to that of learning. Even in the 1970s the rise of interest in the “lifelong” dimension was always connected to education, such as in the landmark 1972 UNESCO report Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow (Faure et al. 1972) or even in one of the early OECD contributions to the discussion, the 1973 report Recurrent Education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1973).

Two decades later UNESCO was still pursuing the education line, for example in the 1996 report Learning: The Treasure Within (Delors et al. 1996)—but do note the title—which not only argued for the need “to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong education” so that it not only focuses on adaptation “to changes in the nature of work” but also constitutes “a continuous process of forming whole human beings” (ibid., p. 19), but also argued for a shift in attention “from social cohesion to democratic participation” (ibid., chapter 2) and “from economic growth to human development” (ibid., chapter 3), paying explicit attention to the political, democratic, and global dimensions of lifelong learning. Learning: The Treasure Within can, in a sense, be read as a response to a rapidly emerging alternative discourse on lifelong learning, one strongly characterized by an economic rationale and a focus on lifelong learning as the development of human capital.

The idea that lifelong learning is first and foremost about the development of human capital so as to secure competitiveness and economic growth played a central role in an influential document published by the OECD in 1997, with the title Lifelong Learning for All. Lifelong Learning for All put a strong emphasis on the economic rationale for lifelong learning—itself understood in the rather formal sense as learning “throughout life” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1997, p. 15). It presented the idea of “lifelong learning for all” as “the guiding principle for policy strategies that will respond directly to the need to improve the capacity of individuals, families,
workplaces and communities to continuously adapt and renew” (ibid., p. 13). Such adaptation and renewal are presented as necessary in the face of changes in the global economy and the world of work. Lifelong learning “from early childhood education to active learning in retirement” is thus presented as “an important factor in promoting employment and economic development” and, in addition to this, also in promoting “democracy and social cohesion” (ibid., p. 13). Whereas, as mentioned, the Delors report made a case for shifting the attention from social cohesion to democratic participation and from economic growth to human development, Lifelong Learning for All went in the opposite direction where it concerns economic growth, seeing democracy and social cohesion as compatible agendas rather than as agendas that are potentially in tension with each other (on this see also Biesta 2006c).

The shift from lifelong education to lifelong learning signifies a number of things. It is first of all a shift in orientation from lifelong education having to do with personal and democratic aims toward an economic if not economistic rationale, in which lifelong learning becomes a matter of the abstract production of human capital, both at the level of individuals and their skills and competences and at the more macro-level where lifelong learning then appears as “a key strategy to adjust human capital to new requirements” (ELLI Development Team 2008, p. 8). It is, however, not only the orientation of lifelong learning that has changed; there are also important changes with regard to its form. One significant change is the ongoing individualization of lifelong learning, something that Field (2000) shows empirically—his idea of a silent explosion—but that can also be found ideologically, for example in the emphasis on the need for individuals to adapt and adjust to the demands of the global economy, in the reformulation of lifelong learning as the acquisition of a set of flexible skills and competences, and also, of course, in the subtle but crucial semantic shift from “lifelong education”—a relational concept—to “lifelong learning”—an individualistic concept.

While this is a matter of “form,” it is also a matter of politics. The most important shift at this level concerns the transformation of lifelong learning as a right that individuals can claim into a duty that all individuals need to live up to (as a more careful reading of the title of the OECD’s 1997 Lifelong Learning for All can reveal: not lifelong learning as available to all but lifelong learning as demanded from all). Messerschmidt (2011, p. 18) has connected this shift—which she characterizes as the emergence of a kind of Bildungspflicht” (a duty to education)—to the Lisbon Strategy and highlights, correctly in my view, that with the rise of the duty to “Bildung,” one of the key characteristics of adult education, namely, the voluntary nature of participation, has disappeared.

Elsewhere (Biesta 2006c, pp. 175–176) I have argued that we can also see this shift as a reversal of rights and duties in that under the lifelong education paradigm, individuals had a right to lifelong education and the state a duty to provide resources and opportunities, whereas under the lifelong learning paradigm, individuals have ended up with the duty to learn throughout life, whereas the state now seems to be in a position where it can claim the right to demand of all its citizens that they learn throughout their lives. One telling example of this is the rise of the notion of “hard-to-reach-learners” in lifelong learning policy in the United Kingdom and in other English-speaking countries (see, for example, Brackertz 2007), suggesting that somewhere in the dark concerns of society there are still a few individuals who refuse to live up to their learning duty.

It is here that we can begin to see the politics of learning at work. There are a number of aspects to this. One key dimension of the politics of learning is the increasing tendency to turn political problems into learning problems, thus shifting the responsibility for addressing such problems from the state and the collective to the level of individuals. We can see this clearly in the rise of the economic rationale and the fact that individuals are made responsible for keeping up their employability in rapidly changing global markets, rather than that the question is raised why such markets should rule over the economy and over social and political life more generally in the first place. The issue is entirely defined as a question of individual adaptation and adjustment—as a matter of learning—and not as one about structural issues and collective responsibilities.

The pressure is, however, coming not only from the outside but also from the inside. This has to do with the very construction of the lifelong learner identity as a process of Foucauldian “governamental,” where individuals begin to identify with and then internalize the demand for lifelong learning.

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2. I use “economistic” here as referring to the idea of the economy as an aim and value in itself—similar to the difference between “scientific” and “scientistic.”

3. The Lisbon Strategy is the name for an action-and-development plan initiated in 2000 with the aim to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. It has had a significant impact on education in the member countries also through the so-called Bologna Process, aimed at the harmonization of higher education across the EU member states.
learning. They thus do not simply become “permanently learning subjects” (Field 2000, p. 35) as a result of external pressures, but actually feel an internal “need” to construct and conduct themselves in this way (see, for example, Fornbeck and Wran 2005; Fejes 2006; Biesta 2006c). Rather than a “treasure within,” learning thus turns into a “pressure within,” so that the politics of learning is being fed by our apparent will to learn (see Simons and Masschelein 2009).

The politics of learning is also at work in the shift from a democratic interest in lifelong education and lifelong learning toward an emphasis on social cohesion and integration. Part of the problem here—a simple but crucial one—is that a cohesive society is not necessarily or automatically also a democratic society. Also, notions of social integration and cohesion always raise the question as to who needs to be integrated into what or cohere with whom, and also who is allowed to set the agenda and define the terms of integration and cohesion (see also Biesta 2010b, chapter 6). And again lifelong learning is being mobilized to facilitate integration and cohesion through processes of adaptation and adjustment similar to what we have seen with regard to adaptation and adjustment to the “demands” of the economy.

The fourth aspect of the politics of learning that I wish to highlight has to do with the naturalization of learning, that is, with the tendency to see learning as an entirely natural phenomenon—on the same par as breathing and digestion. To suggest that learning is simply part of our biological and increasingly also our neurological “makeup” and therefore as something we cannot help but do—something we cannot not do—leads to a slippery slope where (1) learning first becomes equated with living, (2) then almost necessarily becomes a lifelong process, which (3) next moves to the claim that any normal human being can learn, (4) then easily moves to the suggestion that therefore every normal human being should learn, so that (5) in the end, there must be something wrong with you if you do not want to learn and refuse the learner identity.

To highlight these aspects of the politics of learning—that is, the political work that is being done through the notion and language and discourse of learning—is not to deny that there may be some good aspects to learning (although I am becoming less and less optimistic about this precisely because of the problems outlined above), but to be aware that the language of learning is not an innocent language but actually a language that exerts a powerful influence on what we can be and how we can be, one that tends to domesticate rather than to emancipate. But if this is so, what are the opportunities for resistance, and what might learning still have to do there? Let me now turn to these questions.

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**Denaturalizing Learning Is Repoliticizing Learning, Repoliticizing Learning Requires Denaturalizing Learning**

If part of the way in which the politics of learning is able to do its work stems from the suggestion that learning is a natural process and phenomenon, then the first step toward exposing the political work being done through learning is by denaturalizing learning, that is, highlighting what we might call the artificial nature of learning. One way to denaturalize the idea of learning is by acknowledging that “learning” is an evaluative concept, not a descriptive one. If we start from the widely accepted definition of learning as any more or less durable change that is not the result of maturation, we can see that when we use the word learning—for example, in such sentences as “John has learned to ride a bicycle” or “Mary has learned the first law of thermodynamics”—we are not so much describing change as that we are making a judgment about change. The point is that when we observe John more carefully we will probably be able to identify numerous things that have changed. The reason for identifying some of these changes as “learning” and others as “just changes” is because we value these changes—either positively, for example, when we are proud that John has learned to ride his bike, or negatively, for example, when John has picked up some bad habits in the process—and because we have reason to believe that, at least to a certain extent, these changes are the result of interaction with an environment and not just the outcome of maturation.

This indicates that “learning” expresses a judgment, which suggests that when we use the word learning we are not so much describing a fact as that we are evaluating an event. (We could say, therefore, that learning is not a noun.) It is this judgment, then, that constitutes change as learning. To see “learning” as an evaluative term can be an effective way to denaturalize the idea of learning because it allows us, each time the word learning is being used, not only to ask what kind of judgment is being made—that is, what the reasons are for identifying particular change as learning—but also to ask who is involved in making the judgment; who, in other words, claims the power to define particular change as learning (and other change “just” as change).

The other way in which the idea of learning can be denaturalized is by simply refusing the very identity of a learner, thus showing that this identity is not inevitable but can actually be refused (see also Simons and Masschelein 2009). Such a refusal can help to make visible that calling someone a learner is actually a very specific intervention, where the claim is made that the one who is being called a learner lacks something, is not yet complete or competent, and therefore needs to engage in further “learning activity.” While in some specific
cases it is entirely legitimate to make this assumption—for example, if one has an explicit desire to master a particular skill or gain particular knowledge or understanding—it is important to keep the learner identity confined to such cases and see it as a pragmatic, time-bound, and situation-bound choice, and not as a natural state of affairs. Moreover, in some cases it can actually be politically important to refuse the learner identity, particularly in those cases where, as mentioned above, the learner identity is being used to burden individuals with tasks, demands, and duties that should be the responsibility of the collective. To refuse the learner identity, to claim that in some cases there is actually nothing to learn—for example, to claim that one can speak as a citizen without first having to learn what it means to speak “properly” (see below; see also Biesta 2011b)—is not to denounce the importance of learning, but to denaturalize and hence politicize learning so that choices, politics, and power become visible. To refuse the learner identity thus at the very same time exposes and opposes the politics of learning at work.

**Emancipation without Learning?**

If the ideas presented so far make some sense, I would, in the final step of this chapter, like to connect this to the difficult but important issue of emancipation. After all, if it is the case that learning has to a large extent become an instrument of domestication if not, to use the beautiful word for which we have to thank the translator of Rancière (see Rancière 1991a), an instrument of stultification, then the important question for (us) educators is whether we can still envisage opportunities for emancipation and, more specifically, for emancipation without learning. There are two authors who in my view have made important contributions to this challenge—one being Michel Foucault, the other being Jacques Rancière. In the remainder of this chapter I will confine myself to presenting Foucault’s ideas as an example of an understanding of emancipation-without-learning. I turn to Rancière in Chapter 5. Let me, in this section, say something about the role learning plays in “modern” understandings of emancipation in order then, in the next section, to see whether, with Foucault, we can envisage emancipation without learning.

The idea that emancipation requires learning is one that partly has come to us from the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant’s suggestion that we can escape or overcome our immaturity—our determination by the other—if we have the courage to make use of our rational capacities. But more explicitly the connection between emancipation and learning can be found in the Marxist idea that in order to liberate ourselves from the oppressive workings of power, we need to expose how power operates. A central idea here that, in turn, has strongly influenced critical and emancipatory pedagogies, is the notion of ideology, which not only expresses the claim that all thought is socially determined but also that ideological thought is thought that denies this determination. The “predicament of ideology” lies in the suggestion that it is precisely because of the way in which power works upon our consciousness, that we are unable to see how power works upon our consciousness. (I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.) This not only implies that in order to free ourselves from the workings of power we need to expose how power works upon our consciousness. It also means that in order for us to achieve emancipation, someone else, whose consciousness is not subjected to the workings of power, needs to provide us with an account of our objective condition. According to this line of thought, therefore, emancipation is ultimately contingent upon the truth about our objective condition, a truth that can only be generated by someone who is positioned outside of the influence of ideology.

The educational “translation” of this “logic” of emancipation basically takes two forms, one that can be characterized as monological and one that can be characterized as dialogical. The monological approach is the most direct translation of the ideas outlined above. It relies on the assumption that emancipation requires an intervention from the outside—an intervention, moreover, by someone who is not subjected to the power that needs to be overcome. Thus emancipation appears as something that is done to somebody and hence relies on a fundamental inequality between the emancipator and the one to be emancipated. Equality, on this account, becomes the outcome of emancipation; it becomes something that lies in the future. Moreover, it is this outcome that is used to legitimize the interventions of the emancipator. This is a “logic” of emancipatory education—a logic that we might also call “colonial” (see, for example, Andreotti 2011)—in which the teacher knows and students do not know yet; where it is the task of the teacher to explain the world to the students and where it is the task of the students to ultimately become as knowledgeable as the teacher. In this setup there is a clear learning task for the student, a task that is basically reproductive in that it is aimed at the acquisition of the insights and understandings of the teacher-emanipator.

It is one of the main achievements of Paulo Freire to have provided a dialogical alternative in which emancipation is no longer seen as a process of truth-telling by the teacher-emanipator—Freire’s notion of “banking education”—but where it becomes a process of the collective discovery of oppressive structures, processes, and practices, a process in which teacher and students are positioned as “co-subjects” (Freire 1972, p. 135). Freire characterizes oppression as the situation in which individuals are disconnected
from the world and exist as objects of the oppressor’s actions rather than as subjects of their own actions. Oppression is thus understood as a process of “dehumanization” that occurs when people’s natural ways of “being-in-praxis” are disrupted or suppressed (ibid.). Emancipation on this account is aimed at restoring the connection between human beings and the world, or, in Freire’s vocabulary, restoring praxis. The role of the teacher in this process is to reinitiate dialogical and reflective practices that in turn reinitiate praxis and link people back to the world (ibid., p. 30). For Freire emancipation therefore also involves learning—and more, perhaps, than in the banking model of emancipation, this is an ongoing and in a sense lifelong process. The learning is, however, not reproductive but constructive or generative, albeit that it still has an orientation toward truth. Unlike in the monological model, however, this is not the truth given by the teacher to students about their objective condition on the assumption that students are unable to acquire such insights themselves.

**FOR EXAMPLE: FOUCAULT AND THE PRACTICE OF TRANSGRESSION**

Although I have shown that truth occupies a different position in the monological and the dialogical approach, both approaches ultimately rely on the possibility of truth and, more specifically, truth uncontaminated by power. In the monological approach this truth is learned from the teacher; in the dialogical approach this truth is discovered through a collective learning process. That both approaches rely on the idea of truth uncontaminated by power has, in the monological approach, to do with the fact that emancipation is seen as a process of overcoming ideological distortions. Here emancipation operates as a process of *demythification*. In the dialogical approach emancipation is the process that restores true human existence—or in Freirean language, true human praxis. In both cases, truth is needed to overcome alienation, either the alienation produced by false consciousness or the alienation brought about by oppression. For truth to be able to do this “work,” it must be assumed that there is a fundamental distinction between truth and power—and one could indeed argue that this distinction is foundational for the modern project of Enlightenment (for example, Habermas 1990), evidence of which we can find in the idea of “speaking truth to power.”

One author who has challenged this very assumption is Michel Foucault. He has argued that power and knowledge never occur separately but always come together, something that is expressed in the idea of “power/knowledge.”

This is why he has suggested that we should abandon “the whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can only exist where the power relations are suspended” (Foucault 1975, p. 27)—a tradition that forms the basis for both monological and dialogical approaches to emancipation. Yet to argue that we have to abandon this particular tradition is not to suggest that change is no longer possible. It rather is to highlight that we are always operating *within* power/knowledge “constellations”—that is, of power/knowledge versus power/knowledge—and not of knowledge versus power or power versus knowledge. There is, therefore, potential for action, change, and critique, but we have to understand this in terms that are fundamentally different from the idea that emancipation is an *escape* from power.  

Foucault agrees with Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant that criticism “consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits” (Foucault 1984, p. 45). But “if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge had to renounce transgressing, … the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” (ibid.). In some of his writings Foucault has referred to this approach as “eventalization” (Foucault 1991, p. 76). Eventalization “means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all” (ibid.). Eventalization works “by constructing around the singular event… a ‘polygon’ or rather a ‘polyhedron’ of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite” (ibid., p. 77). Eventalization thus means to complicate and to pluralize our understanding of events, their elements, their relations, and their domains of reference.

Eventalization therefore does not result in a deeper understanding, an understanding of underlying structures or causes, and in this respect it does precisely not generate the kind of knowledge that will set us free from the workings of those structures or causes. But Foucault has been adamant that

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4. My reading of Foucault differs from what I see as a very common misreading of Foucault that suggests he has given us ultimate knowledge about the operations of power. Such a reading still relies on the assumption that power and knowledge “operate” separately, yet it is precisely this assumption that has been challenged by Foucault. This doesn’t mean that there is nothing to know about power, but it does mean that such knowledge is itself not “beyond” the workings of power.

5. What I have tried to do with the notion of “learning” in the earlier parts of this chapter can precisely be understood in this way.
this does not mean that such analysis is without effect. What eventualization does not generate, so he has argued, is advice or guidelines or instructions as to what is to be done. But what it can bring about is a situation in which people “no longer know what they do,” so that the acts, gestures, discourses which up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous—and this effect, so he argues, is entirely intentional (ibid., p. 84). Thus eventualization neither results in a deeper or truer understanding of how power works—it only tries to unsettle what is taken for granted—not aims to produce recipes for action. This kind of analysis is therefore not meant to solve problems; it is not a kind of knowledge meant for “social workers” or “reformers” but rather for subjects who act. As Foucault explains,

Critique doesn’t have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal. It doesn’t have to lay down the law for the law. It isn’t a stage of programming. It is a challenge directed to what is. (Ibid., p. 84)

Rather than to think of emancipation as an escape from power, Foucault envisages emancipation as a “practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression” (Foucault 1984, p. 45; emphasis added). The critical practice of transgression is not meant to overcome limits (not in the least because limits are not only constraining but always also enabling; see Simons 1995, p. 69). Transgression rather is the practical and experimental “illumination of limits” (Foucault 1977, pp. 33–38; Boyne 1990)—such as in the attempt to see how far we can go in denying the very existence of learning or the very suggestion that learning has anything to do with us or that we have anything to do with learning.

Foucault’s rejection of the founding distinction of modern Enlightenment—that is, the distinction between knowledge and power—does therefore not imply the end of the possibility of emancipation and the end of the possibility of critique, but makes emancipation from an endeavor based on truth—either the truth to be given by the teacher-emancipator or the truth discovered through collective critical learning—into the practical task of transgression. Transgression means doing things differently in order to show—or to prove, as Foucault would say—that things can be different and that the way things are is not the way things necessarily should be, for example, that we can also not be a lifelong learner. Thus the emancipatory potential of transgression lies in the possibility “of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” —and in precisely this sense, Foucault suggests, “it is seeking to give a new impetus . . . to the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault 1984, p. 46).

With Foucault we can thus begin to see the contours of a different understanding of and approach to emancipation, one where emancipation is no longer an escape from power through demystification but becomes a practice of transgression—the practical confrontation of different power/knowledge constellations—in order to show that things do not have to be the way they currently are. There is critical work to be done in relation to this, but this is not a process of demystification, of speaking truth to power, but one of eventualization, that is, of the pluralization of truth. This also means, and this is quite important for my discussion, that the role of learning in emancipation becomes a radically different one. In one sense we could say that if we follow Foucault there is no longer anything to learn, at least not if we see learning as the condition for emancipation. There is, to be more precise, nothing to learn about our objective condition because if we follow Foucault we have to give up the idea that we can make a distinction between our objective condition and our distorted understandings of this condition. Similarly there is nothing to learn about our true human existence because, if we follow Foucault, we have to give up the idea that there is one single true human existence—there are many, which is not to suggest that they are all of equal value or worth, or that human existence is without limits.

While there is, therefore, no longer the suggestion that a particular kind of learning, a learning that discloses the truth, will result in emancipation, this doesn’t mean that there is nothing to pick up from transgression and pluralization, as long as we bear in mind that these processes themselves are not driven by learning. It is the transgression and pluralization that come first, and what we pick up from our engagement in such emancipatory experiments comes second (and what we do with that is still another matter). In this regard Foucault’s approach does suggest a different connection between learning and emancipation. One could also say that given the fact that work of freedom for Foucault is undefined, the process will never come to an end, and in this regard emancipation is a lifelong challenge (not unlike what Freire had in mind, albeit on different terms), that freedom is not a point or a state we can ever reach.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I have tried to raise some critical questions about the notion of “learning,” the language of “learning,” and the discourse of “learning.”
My intention has been to unsettle the positive if not warm feelings educators,
educationalists, and people working for change for the better may have for
learning, showing the political "work" that is being done through this notion—
particularly the political work that keeps us in our place and domesticates and
stultifies us, rather than helping us to act differently and be different. I have
done this, first of all, by showing some of the problems with the language of
learning in educational settings, highlighting the fact that the language of
learning tends to obscure those dimensions that make education educational,
so to speak. Here I have particularly highlighted the way in which questions
about content, purpose, and relation easily disappear from view when we start
to talk about education in terms of the individualistic and individualizing
process-language of learning. I have, through a discussion of transformations
in the field of lifelong learning, tried to highlight how through the very idea
of "learning" a substantial amount of political work is done, and that even the
very construction of lifelong learning as a "field" is already an example of the
politics of learning that is at work. Against this background I have suggested
that there is a need for interrupting the politics of learning.

A starting point for such interrupting is to resist the suggestion that
learning is a natural process and thus something that simply "occurs"—as if
beyond our control. In addition I have highlighted the importance of
refusing the very identity of a learner—and more specifically of a lifelong
learner—a refusal that at the same time can expose and oppose the workings of
the politics of learning. In the final step I have connected this to the discussion
on emancipation in order to show that to give up the notion of learning
does not mean to give up on the idea of emancipation. I have used Foucault
as an example of what emancipation-without-learning—which for Foucault
becomes emancipation-as-transgression—might look like, also showing how
my critique of the politics of learning can itself be understood as an attempt
at transgression. This is not—or not yet—a wholesale denouncement of
the idea of learning, as I still want to be open to the possibility that learning can
also work for the good. The crucial issue here is whether it can be up to us to
decide whether we learn or not, whether to adopt the learner identity or not,
or whether we can only subject ourselves to ongoing demands for learning and
ongoing demands to fashion ourselves as lifelong learners—that is, whether we
can only succumb to the duty to learn. The crucial question, in other words,
is whether we lend anonymous, metaphysical power to the idea of learning,
or whether we seize this power in order to make learning as strong or as weak
as we want it to be—that is, where learning can work for us, rather than that
we have to work for learning, if such an expression makes sense.

Chapter Five

Emancipation

Equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified.
—Jacques Rancière

In this chapter I focus in more detail on what I see as one of the more
difficult and certainly one of the more contentious educational questions,
which is the question whether and, if so, how education can contribute to
the freedom of the human subject. This is the question of emancipation.
While the idea of emancipation has a respectable history in educational
thought and practice—a history that goes back at least to the Enlight-
enment—one of the difficulties of connecting education and emancipa-
tion has to do with a contradiction that becomes visible when we think
of education as a "powerful intervention" aimed at setting people free.
Thinking about emancipation in this way immediately raises questions
about the power invested in the emancipator as well as about the alleged
unfreedom of those being emancipated. In addition, it raises questions
about the role and status of equality, as the idea of emancipation as a
"powerful intervention" seems to rely on the idea that emancipation is
the process through which a relationship of inequality is transformed into
a relationship of equality—thus making equality into the desired "out-
come" of emancipatory education. In this chapter I explore the history of
emancipation in education, identify some of its key contradictions, and,
through a discussion of the work of Jacques Rancière, outline a different
way to engage with the theme of emancipation in education.