

A Plea for Reciprocity, or not Exactly for Reciprocity?

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Abstract

How to find a proper stand to describe the position of a teacher in contemporary university? With no tangible results teaching is being rapidly de-professionalized. Yet this very de-professionalization opens up some new opportunities for educational theory and practice. A specific asymmetry of a teacher and her or his audience might establish new form of educational communication. Not of a distanced professional kind but rather of a friendly mutual need.

Key words: university, friendship, reciprocity, mutuality

Academic professions could never be practiced alone. Ideas and conceptions are exposed by a lecturer inviting her or his audience to experience common intellectual adventures. The intensiveness of this process depends heavily on everyone's participation and engagement *hic et nunc*, in particular time and place. Why an audience is paying attention to a lecture at all? Why they actually listen, receive ideas and give back questions?

This is an unsigned but effective contract between us, indispensable to what is happening here, namely, that you accord, lend, or give some attention and some meaning to what I myself am doing by giving, for example, a lecture. This whole presupposition will remain indispensable at least for the credit that we accord each other, the faith or good faith that we lend each other, even if a little while we were to argue and disagree about everything. (Derrida, 1992, p. 11).

A teacher is giving a lecture. An audience is giving back attention, according some credit to what is being said. This is quite a traditional representation of a scene of teaching. At the core of any single educational event (i.e. giving a lecture) stands reciprocal exchange of knowledge, feelings and commitments. Derrida invites us to step out of the circle of exchange to make room for a gift to be (Derrida, 1992, p. 13). Yet what if we take his word on 'unsigned contract' literally? If we take what a lecturer is giving to us then what she or he is taking? Despite of how attractive the departure from gift-counter-gift system is or might be should this philosophical posture serve as an appropriate excuse for the breach of contract? Or is there an asymmetry between a teacher and an audience so that one just supplies a product or a service on demand? In fact the 'effectiveness' of the teacher-audience relation is granted by a signed contract between a teacher and a university and the existence of this contract should not be overshadowed by a simplified representation of a university lecture. Moreover, Derridean exposition of a concrete lecturing process somehow blurs the boundary of talking and writing, covertly transforming the listeners to whom the lecture was actually given into a vague multitude of readers who are supposed to act (to give credit) as if this lecture was given to them as well. This confusion reveals profound ambiguity of academic professions including philosophy which pertains to way they are being practiced in the university. Probably we should not let the gift transferred in the lecture to stay unrecognized so easily (Derrida, 1992, p. 13) thus granting it a hidden yet evident presence.

We have to examine critically the starting point, the scene of teaching in order to see whether a gift-giving relationship is still there, what is being given and taken how and by whom. The reciprocity of the gift could not be challenged apart from the understanding of academic profession and academic professionalism as such.

During last decades universities worldwide are experiencing a growing pressure of a rather straightforward economic concern. As early as in 1969 this concern was clearly expressed by Peter Drucker: "Education is far too big a cost to be accepted without questioning. To ask whether it is fruitful investment or simply expense is a legitimate question" (Drucker, 1969, p. 313). Yet despite obviously growing responsiveness of university management to the business demands of that kind there is still no coherent vision let alone a sustained methodology of measuring effectiveness of public spending on higher education. We lack clear understanding of both external and internal processes of capital allocation in publicly-funded HEI's. Although further research of the actual capital allocation procedures in public universities is very much needed I'm going to make a step back and entertain another question: what are the limitations for representing higher education in terms of possible revenues on investments? Unlike many critiques of entrepreneurialism in universities I'd like to demonstrate that those limitations emerge from inside university due to the intrinsic ambiguity of the notion of academic professionalism which reveals immediately after we agree to play with this "investments-and-expenses" language with respect to education.

Academics are obviously being paid as professionals but what they do as professionals? The expected answer might be that they do research and teaching. Universities may well be run as businesses yet unlike private enterprises they claim to preserve a much broader societal mission inspired – at least in Western context – by a Humboldtian notion of the unity of research and teaching (Humboldt, 1792/1854; Bahti, 1987). A youngster attending university according to this conception is supposed to cultivate himself into an enlightened personality through entering a realm of pure science via intensive communication with senior colleagues. This "principled" approach is now shadowed by "governmental" approach emphasizing importance of employability and active civic participation (Simons, 2007). On the other hand doing research today conveys much greater status and funding to particular scientists and disciplinary divisions than teaching. The importance of scientific output is largely out of sight of the student audience which mostly wants just to get a profitable job outside academy after graduation.

Universities and academic communities have to deal with highly conflicting messages (cf. Deem, 2006). Money for research are provided by governmental institutions. However when government funding is rapidly shrinking or frozen it is extremely important to attract as much money as possible from student fees. Educators in OECD countries and beyond are trying to balance the broader societal mission of universities with growing managerial pressure for measurable performance indicators of the university "services". There is an abundance of methods to evaluate universities' effectiveness and outcomes. Yet it seems that what exactly is defined as a "service" provided by HEI's critically depends on stakeholder's position. That brings us to the first dilemma of academic professionalism:

Different stakeholders are investing in different kinds of academic professionalism and want to get different kinds of revenue on their investments. The only way to provide steady returns on state or business investments in the research is to redistribute resources of the university in order to lessen teaching loads of most productive researchers thus diminishing expectations from the quality of university teaching and producing increasing disappointment among students.

Recent study in the UK has found that students tend to identify employment and employability therefore equating personal development which is supposed to happen in the university with a mere chance to find a well-paid job after graduation (Tymon, 2013). Therefore in students' perspective basic university service is to provide future employment. That situation is implicitly ironic because students are supposed to acquire skills compatible with market demands from academic professionals who are either out of the market themselves being tenured or – which is happening more and more often today – occupy precarious part-time positions. Since academics are not being held accountable for their skills in employability development there is no way to prove that they are actually making their students more employable. Academics are apparently the only known professional group that maintains its status without paying much attention to the actual needs of the largest group of its clients. Moreover, since they are being evaluated first and foremost for their peer-reviewed scientific outcomes and the quality of those outcomes is accessed irrespective to the quality of their teaching students are implicitly excluded from their peers as they don't have any influence on the assessment procedures. Humboldt conception of university as a model academic community is then undermined which is what actually happened with universities in the era of massification. As professors have less and less time to talk with their students apart from scheduled in advance classes they are more likely to follow clearly established regulations. Modern university is much greater a procedural than creative entity of a gift-giving kind.

Nevertheless the idea of intrinsic unity of research and teaching is actively galvanized due to the outright governmental interest for pushing forward competitiveness of national universities. (Simons, 2007). This global competition is getting even tougher against the background of growing budget constraints which enforce the managerial demand for clear and consistent performance indicators of the academic labour. In the prevailing climate of tangible results measuring teaching-related outcomes remains a tremendously difficult task. Although the quality of teaching can be assessed through peer and students evaluation it is unclear how to use this information in making further financial decisions. In their groundbreaking work Baumol and Bowen (Baumol & Bowen 1966; Baumol 1996) articulated the view on teaching as a “stagnant service”, i.e. a service with constant labor productivity and ever-growing costs. ‘Stagnant services’ are characterized by a ‘handicraft attribute’ (i.e. dependence on unique expertise of particular educator), low standardization and low turnover rate (i.e. educational practices are usually time-consuming). The very process of education in a traditional form of a face-to-face conversation in case of mass higher education inevitably cause growing time and money losses unless a university manager comes up with a radical decisions to decrease labor costs. Those decisions include but are not limited to hiring more people on a part-time basis, lessening number of tenured positions, inflating the share of courses provided online. That brings us to the second dilemma of academic professionalism:

To provide financial sustainability of a university its managers have to de-professionalize teaching labour as such. This economically effective decision undermines the inner ethical foundations of academic community as a collegiate body.

It is precisely the “handicraftness” and un-standardized way of performance that are cherished marks of professional academic teaching. Yet university manager has something to do with sky-high costs of the traditional educational process. What variables can be used to control the costs? One can easily transform the above-mentioned characteristics of a ‘stagnant service’ into such a set. Thus, for a university manager the low rate of ‘handicraftness’, high standardization and high turnover could serve perfectly well as

tangible indicators of a low risk attached to a certain educational "service". Long-lamented (Roberts & Donahue, 2000) de-professionalization of teaching, replacement of tenured academics by precarious part-timers seems to be the only reasonable scenario if economic effectiveness of the universities is seriously at stake. Yet should the re-imagination of the university strive to re-establish the supposed unity of research and teaching explicitly rejecting prevailing entrepreneurial discourse? Ironically enough the existence of positive relationship between research and teaching has never been properly analyzed let alone proved (Verburgh, Elen, and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). It is high time to challenge the basic assumption of Humboldtian university, the idea that every university professor is or should be both a professional scientist and a professional teacher. Whether universities world-wide are already being transformed into assemblages of a few celebrated professional researches and a mass of unknown de-professionalized part-time teachers is yet to be decided. If teaching does not have any value as such it might be easily transformed onto a mere procedural activity performed by whoever would like to earn some money by doing that.

The very possibility of quantitative assessment of unique expertise associated with particular teacher is still a hot spot of debates both in and outside academic community. Yet what if we take this real or would-be de-professionalization of teaching as a chance to re-imagine the foundations of university? To an extent a truly Humboldtian university comprising all its members as partners in pursuit of truth never existed. Moreover, Prussian universities were selective institutions designed for white males. In the modern era of mass higher education teaching changed dramatically. The more diversified is the audience the more perspectives and insights are brought into consideration. New ideas are not just presented to the audience, they appear in the disputation. Educational process thus turns into complex exchange of knowledge and feelings providing all its participants an opportunity to experience intellectual controversies together. Teaching could never be practiced alone and its experience is never limited to the level of ideas. Giving and receiving ideas while talking is something that always happens collectively. Writing on the contrary is a solitary occupation. The sense of suddenly emerged reciprocity could not be fully communicated through written texts. This reciprocal process is pursued for its own sake because of the shared pleasure of all companions. A talk might be a source of pleasure in itself if no collocutor pretends to hold a dominant position. It doesn't make any sense just to give lectures if a lecturer is not ready to take something at the same time. Why at all a person might be willing to teach? In a precarious de-professionalized context sketched above it is obviously not the best way to make money. The other possible explanation is that she or he cares of others good. If I care of someone who is not my relative she or he might be named my friend. Then I won't be just giving lectures since I'll be taking my students for friends as well. Friendship is not a frequent word for contemporary educational philosophy. Since it was for long abandoned we hardly have other choice then to start our exploration of friendship from and with ideas of Aristotle who introduced this topic into the realm of Western philosophy.

Aristotle's concept of *philia* received prolific coverage in the scientific literature. Although historians of philosophy have not reached overall consensus regarding exact meaning of that ambiguous notion the abundance of interpretations still might be filtered down to some core items more or less generally accepted. In this paper I'm following Schwarzenbach's interpretation (Schwarzenbach, 1996). According Schwarzenbach *philia* (friendship) across ethical and political works of Aristotle embraces three basic intuitions: "1) mutual awareness and liking; 2) a reciprocal wishing the other well for that other's sake 3) a reciprocal, "practical" doing things for that other" (Schwarzenbach, 1996, p. 100; see also Cooper, 1999). Whenever those three characteristics of friendship are present together in a mutual relationship of two concrete persons this relationship could and is regarded as a personal

friendship. However, a person might well be benevolent towards a much greater number of other people even not knowing all of them personally. This distributed benevolence according to Aristotle intrinsically permeates sustainable political community (*NE* 1159b25-1160a, trans. 1980). The wishing and doing good for others inasmuch they belong to the same political community as oneself represents the essence of civility (Kekes, 1984) thus being legitimately named civic friendship (Schwarzenbach, 1996; Leontsini, 2013). The distinction of personal and civic friendship once clearly established is rather important for political philosophy. It might be of some importance for the educational philosophy as well. This distinction leads to the question of possible foundations of any friendly relationship. In the case of civic friendship members of political community are actually practicing reciprocity without being mutually aware of each other. Civic friends act in a same way without having exactly the same (if any) feelings for each other. They act reciprocally but non-mutually. Personal friendship is both reciprocal and mutual. Yet there are two more logical opportunities in our space of possible friendships. Firstly, a friendship which is not mutual and not reciprocal. For example, a friendship with a friend who died might still continue in my memory. It might still be very important for me what this dead friend would have said or done in particular situations. Secondly, a mutual friendship which is not reciprocal. Two persons can like each other and wish well to each other and yet it might be impossible for them to act in exactly the same way with regard to that other person. Their mutual benevolence is expressed in a very different and probably not even fully compatible ways. Take for example the relationship of a priest and his parishioner. Taking reciprocity and mutuality as our starting principles we can therefore develop a fourfold classification of possible friendships:

1. Non-reciprocal, non-mutual friendship (i.e. a friendship in memory or in imagination)
2. Non-reciprocal, mutual friendship (i.e. a friendship of a priest and a parishioner)
3. Reciprocal, non-mutual friendship (i.e. a friendship of citizens in a civic community)
4. Reciprocal, mutual friendship (i.e. a friendship with one's own living close friend)

Apart from the case of personal friendship scholarly attention focused mainly on civic friendship, e.g. a reciprocal but non-mutual relationship. The study of reciprocity as a societal phenomenon was substantially enriched by Iris Marion Young's conception of asymmetrical reciprocity (Young). Discussing feminist accounts of gender as well as democratic communication Young put forward the idea that truly reciprocal relationship should be based on the specific stance of moral humility (Young, p. 350). A person taking that stance should refrain from presenting her of his own situation as completely reversible with that of others practicing instead a distanced respect for both apparent and tacit differences.

I agree with Young in her pursuit for asymmetries that are crucial for proper understanding of different kinds of social relations and further development of sustained version of communicative ethics. Yet I argue that along with a position of a giver (i.e. to give my attention to someone else) it is equally important to experience a position of a taker (i.e. to accept others attention to me). Young's exposition of an appropriate communication implies that all collocutors are autonomous, completely independent personalities. A teacher often happens to deal with other persons who are not fully independent. Children and youth might actually depend on their teacher as well as they depend on their fellows. The actual communication in and out of class is usually preconditioned by a variety of evident yet unspoken differences. That is definitely not enough for a teacher to be an active listener for a great variety of things remains silenced. Moreover, I can be aware of the differences that other people have and yet stay indifferent to them. In order to have a chance to communicate

a teacher has to act as if she or he is in need of her or his audience. A teacher has to let her or his students know that she or he is in need of them. This feeling of need sometimes might not even be pleasant. It requires not the distancing but the openness to the other. The ongoing de-professionalization of the university gives to the members of academic community a chance to re-think the sense of the teaching practice in terms of that openness to the need they have in others and others have in them. The intensiveness of this event depends heavily on everyone's participation, engagement and trust. We feel the need of others and we help, and we are ready to accept their help too. This kind of relationship could not be prescribed, legislated or managed properly. As Aristotle once said "when people are friends they have no need in justice" (NE 1155a22-28, trans. 1980). They just need each other.

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