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# Teaching Intersections, not Assessments: Celebrating the Surprise of Gift Giving and Gift Getting in the Cultural Commons

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Teaching Intersections, not Assessments:  
Celebrating the Surprise of Gift-Giving and  
Gift-Getting in the Cultural Commons

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For Paul<sup>1</sup>

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## I. The Necessity of Surprise

No Child Left Behind ... has made a muddle of meaningful assessment. Testing has never been more important; inadequate annual progress toward "proficiency" triggers sanctions on schools. Yet testing has never been more suspect, either. The very zeal for accountability is confusing the quest for consistent academic expectations across the country. (Hulbert, 2007, n.p.)

Assessment rules. At our college, as in K-16 institutions across the country, teachers are being told to teach to fulfill pre-determined goals, and that the value of their work will be measured by the degree to which their students realize those outcomes. Increasingly required to find quantifiable ways of evaluating their students' achievements, teachers are subjected, in turn, to statistical methods such as "value-added modeling," which calculate how much we have helped our "students learn, based on changes in test scores from year to year" (Dillon, 2010n.p.). This article intends to blow a whistle at this train, in hopes of derailing its hurtling progress, by offering an explicit intervention into such processes of standardized assessment. This intervention is conceptual, rather than procedural, precisely because we refuse to offer procedural solutions to what we see as epistemological problems: the cultural processes that limit education to the evaluation of individuals and their comparative deficits. In offering the following geography of surprise, we follow the lead of educational anthropologists McDermott and Varenne (2006) who said, "Do not ask us for a solution. Ask us to help. Ask others to help" (p. 29). This is our effort to do both those things.

While we affirm the necessity for progress in the work of teaching and learning, we wish to call a halt to the singular, linear, and narrowly causal relation of inputs and outcomes – called in Education circles the "process/product" approach -- that underlies much contemporary assessment rhetoric. We claim that the "maddeningly complex" project of separating out measurements of good teaching and good learning from both the idiosyncrasies of individual processes (Dillon, 2010, n.p.) and the complicated cultural interactions among us is an index that we are trying to do what cannot be done, and failing to acknowledge what we can.

This is paradoxical, we recognize, in that much of the current assessment enterprise is “driven by data” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010), and exists in large part as a consequence of powerful machinery that promises to deliver on huge quantitative analyses. But the jump from machinery to human learning is higher and trickier than is often affirmed. Deep and abiding systems for human learning and growth, for cultural continuity and change, are in danger of going underground, becoming invisible, and being dropped from rhetoric and the legitimating voices of educational and public leaders.

This article heads in a contrary direction. Unlike current assessment protocols, which almost all begin by mandating learning goals, and focusing on single core competencies that are eminently assessable (Freeman, 2009), we explore here our experiences as professors opening to surprise, in pedagogical interactions that have unpredictable outcomes. In the course of things, our exploration turns into assertion, even argument: we imagine and advocate for institutional structures that, rather than identifying goals and measuring how well we have achieved them, necessitate surprise and strengthen us to respond creatively and liberally to it. Without room for surprise, we argue, education is denied, and distorted by the loss of, one of its central energies: the circulation of the gifts of chance and serendipity.

The term surprise has a broad range. A person surprised is said to be taken unawares; whether the taking is welcome or not, surprise is a vulnerable, destabilizing, dynamic state. It can apply to attack or failure, but also to astonishment, wonder, and delight. Surprise, we argue here, is ingredient to learning: a sudden, unexpected shift -- truly a change -- of perspective, awareness, or connection that comes about when new knowledge interacts with what we knew before. Without openness to surprise, we struggle to give and take what is not already planned, scripted, or encoded in the prescribed roles we assume in communities and in classrooms. We do not easily change the program; we find it hard to exceed expectations except along pre-determined channels. We become more mechanical, and perhaps less inclined to notice new possibilities.

Our claim, that the drive to adopt exclusively a process/product framework for assessment is a great wrong-turning in what education is and does, takes as its grandfather the pragmatic philosophy of William James (1977b), who advised us to “not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be; for we now know that the idea of chance is, at bottom, exactly the same thing as the idea of gift, -- the one simply being a

disparaging, and the other a eulogistic, name for anything on which we have no effective claim” (p. 159). Our understanding also takes as its father the pedagogical initiatives of John Dewey, once called “the only thinker to assume the full thrust of James’s philosophy” (McDermott, 1977, xxxiii). Dewey identified James’s “original,” “daring,” “fundamental” idea as that “of an open universe in which uncertainty, choice, hypotheses, novelties and possibilities are naturalized” (Dewey, 1998, p. 35).

Our celebration of surprise has quite a few mothers, too. Our work is deeply informed by that of feminist theorists who have urged us, for decades now, to be open to the ways in which experience can unsettle conviction. In particular, we have been inspired both by Sharon Welch’s profound challenge to “the ethic of control” (1990, p. 13), and by Susan Griffin’s explanation of how, when a theory is transformed into an ideology, “experience ceases to surprise it, inform it, transform it. It is annoyed by any details which does not fit into its world view” (hooks, 2000, p. 10). Our work draws resonance, too, from bell hooks’ exhortation to counter this tendency with a scholarly practice of seeking surprise, to continually “criticize, question, re-examine, and explore new possibilities” (2000, p. 11); and from Rosi Braidotti’s description of the pleasure of this activity: how “sometimes the process gets ahead of me and the ideas grow like some astonishing amoeba, to my own surprise and delight” (1994, p. 17). Various feminist (Gore, 1993; Luke & Gore, 1992; Rich, 1977), critical (Giroux, 1980; Lanskhear & McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997), and post-structuralist (Foucault, 1969; Weedon, 1983; Willinsky, 1998) thinkers have arrived at similar claims about the instability of knowledge, and—most importantly for our argument--the value of that instability.

In the attention we give to the arrival of surprise as a fundamental condition of the evolving universe, we also locate ourselves in the contemporary field of emergence (Dalke and Trembley, 2007). Bringing together educational, feminist and emergence theorists to welcome surprise as an orienting principle for twenty-first century education (Dalke and McCormack, 2007), we draw on and update our sense of evolutionary history. It seems particularly fitting to us to elevate surprise in this way at this time. The great changes wrought by technology and globalization have seriously challenged traditional understandings of how culture is transmitted from the aged to the young (Cook-Sather, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2006), from rulers to ruled. Power relations remain potent, of course, but theorists of many stripes (Bhabha, 1994; Dyson, 1997; Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P., & Tejada, C. 1999; Rosaldo, 1989) acknowledge that cultural

movement is much more multidirectional, and so much less predictable, than it was once thought to be. Accordingly, rather than seeking to track something singular, in the mode of contemporary assessment practices, it seems appropriate to us to attend both to multiple inputs and outcomes.

Surprise is an ancient response of the organism to unexpected occurrences (Baxter, 2003). The belief that it is possible for animals, including humans, to control their environments, in order to mitigate such surprise, is a radically new notion, borne of very recent human cognition, and one that is now dominant in educational theory (Callahan, 1962; Spring, 2004). We here argue, however, that in the intensely dynamic realm of education, surprise still has a vital role to play, as an important resource for encouraging teachers and students to consider the unexpected, not as a failure of preparation, competence, or responsibility, but as part of the process of learning and living.

Our theme is what James (1977a) called “the essential provisionality” of “everything empirical and finite” (p. 513). We assume a very hopeful attitude towards this “undoing, this perpetual moving on” (p. 513) of both the universe and the university, the setting where we are trained to think systematically about the world. Surprise is a fundamental condition of life itself; only uncomplicated, mechanical processes are free of it, although they, too, “fail” at times in surprising ways. In the educational arena in particular, surprise can be a crucial generator and consequence of interaction, and a vital opening out from false certainties and fixities. In such a setting, we depend on surprise to de-stabilize assumptions, and pictures of the world, that we may too readily accept as necessities. Accepting surprises can create a space for learning, itself an occasion of movement away from what has been thought to be known, or not even noticed.

The essential unruliness of surprise makes it hard for traditional systems of accountability to handle, which helps explain its relative absence from codes of education. It resembles the essential unruliness of children, hard for their elders to manage. But the contemporary lessons of emergence theory, in which scientists study the complexity of interacting systems, converge on the idea that prediction is difficult, out of synch with the way things happen, and often counter-productive (Grobstein, 2007). Scientists acknowledge that their rigorous studies are often not replicable (Lehrer, 2010), advances in their field often unpredictable (Kolata, 2010).

For all these reasons, we attend here less to individual courses or to the shaping of a whole curriculum than to learning how better to welcome and take advantage of the unknown and interstitial, the unpredictable and uncontrollable spaces that crop up in between plans, as a result of interactions among them. Our particular focus has to do not only with helping ourselves and our students make way for the unexpected, but also with structuring interactions in order to generate something surprising. We argue for creating learning events with an increased awareness of what surrounds and cuts across them: the places around the pages, the bridges (or veerings-away) from course to course, person to person. We recognize that making this argument is tricky: because the very terms of this essay are about surprise, we are not in a position to write proscriptively or predictively. In fact, trickiness is part of the point: we celebrate neither correction nor control, but rather the power of a sudden glimpse.

Our thinking about such spaces began in a surprising, shared experience that made us reconsider our relationship as teachers of the same student in different courses and disciplines, shifting our focus from within-course to across-community. Such a shift reflects the tradition of educational community-making initiated by Gerald Graff (1994). As reported in William Cain's summary edition of *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars* (1994), one of "the oddest things" about the "community of scholars" we call the university is that it conceals its own intellectual links (1994, p. 106). The university enacts a "course fetish," treating autonomous courses as "the natural unit of instruction," and classrooms as "privatized spaces" of "patterned isolation" (Graff, 1994, p. 114). Our project, like those of Graff and his followers, is one of seeking out interactions between classes. But we explicitly do not "teach the conflicts," which risks fixing and isolating different pedagogical projects. Rather, working from the premise that as colleagues we are inevitably involved in each other's work and in the stories we tell about it, we seek to promote and understand the surprises that can come from open-ended interaction across our teaching contexts.

It is the argument of this article that such unpredictability is not only a gift from which we might all profit, but also a gift we might actually increase by the ways in which we structure our exchanges. Following Lewis Hyde's (1998) observation that "convergence produces the accident," is "the source of true innovation" (p. 119), we advocate here for organizing intersections where the as-yet-unknown might occur,

as well as being alert for it when it unexpectedly arises. As we understand it, the point of education, and of conversation, is to enable us to interact with materials (including the immaterial), so that we may increase what we make of, and do in, the world. Encounters with difference are often the source of the renewal that such learning can offer.

Hyde has himself spent the past ten years re-writing the intellectual history of the United States, not as an account of isolated geniuses in “privatized spaces” (cf. Graff, 1994, p. 114), but rather as a cultural commons, a place where people learn from one another. It “takes a capacious mind to play host to others,” Hyde says, “and to find new ways to combine what they have to offer”: “a mind willing to be taught, willing to be inhabited, willing to labor in the cultural commons” (Smith, 2008, n.p.). This cultural commons, as we understand and apply it, is an open system, a space where interaction is not completely channeled in advance. There are conflicts in this interplay of individual and group interests and desires, of course, but the conflicts cannot be known in advance; they, too, are evolving.

A consideration of unanticipated, even unwelcome, consequences leads to the second way in which our imaginings differ dramatically from those who are “teaching the conflicts.” We are not offering a script, but rather are arguing that educators should be mindfully and skillfully improvisatory about the surprising outcomes of the intersections that occur among us and between our projects. We are urging, further, that teachers might learn to be “ready” for such interactions, to regard them not as accidents or problems to be cleaned up, but happily, as the fruit of our plans and aims: newly hybridized, perhaps at first unrecognizable to us. The conception of readiness we wish to explore is motivated by a wish to foster, in ourselves and others, an aptitude and appetite for working with the unknown and uncertain. It is oriented to helping educators tolerate, even welcome, risk, not as a threat to but as an essential part of teaching, of social change, and of life (cf. Welch, 1990; Lesnick, Cohen, & Cook-Sather, 2007).

Working from film and media studies and psychoanalytic theory, curriculum theorist Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) argues that even within single classrooms, the address teachers aim at their students inevitably misses the mark, because students can never be just what a teacher, curriculum, text—or even they themselves—think they are. Their identities are unstable, dynamic, and only partly accessible to others’ and

to their own consciousness. Rather than try to control the uncontrollable, or to correct this misfiring, Ellsworth (1997) suggests, we teachers might put the impossibility of prediction to use. Rather than let fear of such risk inhibit such creativity, we could let it in.

Back now to the beginnings of our awareness of such possibilities, in our happening upon them.

## II. Professing Surprise

“It’s a problem of the viewer’s perspective...  
we’re missing from our own picture. The  
spectator is the true vanishing point.”  
(Hustvedt, 2003, p. 255)

We are professors, respectively, of English and Education in a small liberal arts college. Like other teachers in similar situations, we are apt to experience the unplanned disclosure of some of the “cracks” in our teaching and gaps in our understanding of it not as an invitation to learning, but rather as an electric fence: painful and inhibiting. In what follows, we explore three sites of unanticipated intersection, where sometimes accidentally and sometimes by design, the conversation is not controlled, and where personal and institutional frameworks able to welcome the novel and uncertain are necessary for teaching and learning to take place. Our three sites of analysis are a Critical Feminist Studies course, in which students and alumnae interacted on-line; our college’s Teaching and Learning Initiative, in which students and staff share in reciprocal teaching and learning partnerships; and the initial impetus for this paper: a surprising intersection between these two sites.

Both Anne’s feminist studies course, in which current students interacted with College alumnae, and Alice’s work with staff/student learning partnerships on campus are deliberate constructions of cultural commons, where people who do not typically associate come together by taking up similar roles, moving out of the rigidly different ones they typically occupy in the campus community. Along with the site of their intersection, each functions as a contemporary addition to the history of collaborative, imaginative work that Hyde (1998) traces. By entering a commons in the roles of teachers and learners, people become open to surprises, and thus to forms of learning, which might not emerge or be meaningful from the perspective of narrower institutional identities.

In each of these spaces, knowledge is treated as socially distributed, emergent, and provisional, rather than authoritative or fully resolved. A perspective we both bring to our work as educators is a pleasure in words and, we think along with and because of that, a pleasure in their variable “uptakes,” in the unreliability of response that allows for a range of both misunderstanding and re-interpretation. It would follow that teaching for us, in Ian Bogost’s (2007) terms, is also unable to know its “effects on individual players” (p. 339). Like “literature, poetry, and art,” it can be a matter of “setting the stage for a new understanding unthinkable in the present” (Bogost, 2007, p. 339).

Our first story of surprise involves a trio working at the borderlines between structures. As in the tales to come, surprising tensions borne of newly visible commitments and interests, emergent cultural commons, brought about risk as well as realization. In this initial encounter, the “teaching intersection” is signaled by a student’s paper: the sign of interplay, newly visible and thus opening vulnerability and inquiry between courses, teachers, students, and projects.

In the fall of 2007, with the assistance of a student who was enrolled in Alice’s course on “Empowering Learners,” Anne was teaching “Critical Feminist Studies” for the first time. The work of the student consultant in both courses was born of the intersection of two innovations: the design of Anne’s course, which included the on-line participation of alumnae, and the College’s Teaching and Learning Initiative, through which students serve as consultants to faculty on questions of pedagogy. The student’s consultation with Anne focused on the on-line participation of alumnae, and also constituted her fieldwork for Alice’s Education course, which was an investigation of the nature of educational empowerment in extra-classroom settings. It is probably significant that this surprise occurred at the “crossroads” of two innovations, what Lewis Hyde (1998) calls “‘two-road’ chance” (p. 93), where we found ourselves with a double-dose of stepping into the unknown and as yet undone.

One afternoon, late in the semester, the student consultant came to Anne’s office for one of their regular conferences. In the course of their discussion, she mentioned that she was disappointed in a grade she had received from Alice, on an essay she had written about Anne’s course. At first eager to read the essay, Anne suddenly found herself surprised to see her students described there as “intimidated by a professor who is interested in what they are thinking and more than willing to challenge a statement” (course paper,

2008). These students, her consultant wrote, could recognize “only authoritative teaching,” and “clearly had not made the ideological shift” Anne had made (Student, unpublished course paper, 2008).

“Surprise” is actually too mild a word for Anne’s reaction to this account. She was dismayed to hear herself described as intimidating, and somewhat abashed to be called on her ignorance of a gap between her pedagogical commitments and her students’ expectations. Most important for the story we are telling here, Anne was struck to hear her consultant report that students experienced her intended “welcome” into the co-construction of authority in the classroom not as invitation, but as threat.

The next day—perhaps in retaliation for discomfort at feeling so vulnerable in front of a colleague? — Anne told Alice how surprised she had been to see that grade on the student’s paper. Anne had actually come upon the grade with something of a shock (this was surprise #2). Since she herself never grades students’ written work during the course of a semester, she had assumed that Alice, whom she knew to share most of her progressive pedagogical commitments, would have made a similar choice.

When Alice learned that Anne had been the audience for her comments (surprise #3), she worried whether Anne had agreed with the grade. Shared interest in the complexity of teaching, combined with good humor, blunted any sharp edges that might have turned this worry into fear or threat. A degree of departmental distance and similarity in institutional status also probably lowered the stakes. At a later gathering of TLI participants, we laughed about these unexpected exchanges with the student consultant, whose poise and strength also contributed to our sense of ease.

What might we learn, and how might we generalize, from this triple surprise? How to respond creatively and liberally, when happenstance gives us a bridge to one another’s teaching worlds, and to our students’ experiences traveling within and between them? What might get through on such a bridge? How might we learn to treat an unexpected event such as this not as a moment of assessment or judgment, but rather as a “lucky find” (Hyde, 2008, p. 128), making room for it, rather than rushing to contain it?

### **III. Structuring Surprise**

“...the sheer, unstoppable storytelling drive...is independent of plot outlines and thematic schemes, the hidden story that comes snaking in through any ready crack.” (Chabon, 2008, pp. 82-83)

Our first story was located in the intersection between two courses, with a single student acting as the bridge. In our second story, a teaching intersection occurred within a single course, albeit an innovatively inclusive and surprisingly expansive one, catalyzing dialogue and unanticipated conflict between undergraduates and a group of alumnae.

In designing her new course on Critical Feminist Studies, Anne explicitly intended to create a cultural commons, a space for people with overlapping interests and goals, with mixings and offshoots not anticipated or articulatable in advance. Since the definition of feminism, and what it means to be a feminist, has undergone so many changes from generation to generation (hooks, 2000; Whittier, 1995), she thought it would be educational for students to explore these ideas alongside women who had come of age at different points in the evolution of the movement. She imagined an exploratory class, one full of surprises, rather than one in which she defined any particular outcomes ahead of time. In the terms we are using in this essay, she wanted to incorporate into the structure of the course an awareness both of the impermanence of knowledge, and the surprise of its emergence into new forms. Accordingly, in the fall of 2007, she issued an invitation on the Bryn Mawr College alumnae listserv:

So, alums—did you sometimes cut class when you were an undergrad? Do you wish that you could do Bryn Mawr over again, this time with your current maturity and love and learning? Here’s your chance. You are invited to join undergrads in a new fall course: Introduction to Critical Feminist Studies. All that’s required is your commitment to do the reading and then respond to it, once a week, in an on-line forum discussions....No tuition, no papers, and no exams!...If you’re intrigued—come join us for the fall semester’s give and take....I’m especially looking forward to the possibility that several generations of women will join a dozen or so twenty-somethings, as we explore together the range of ways there have been—and will be—both to read as a feminist and to do feminism.

More than 50 alumnae, whose time at Bryn Mawr spanned the last six decades, responded to this invitation. Of the 22 who eventually joined the 20 undergraduates registered for the course, two of the women graduated in the early 1940s; five participants were in their seventies.

This was not the first class in which Anne had asked students to post their writing online, an act which she understands as part of a movement to diversify "authority" on any given topic. She saw this process, of distributing authoritative voice, as central both to feminist politics and her own brand of feminist pedagogy. It had occurred to her that inviting alumnae into the conversation might mean a challenge to her students' settled political commitments. It had not occurred to her, however, that it might also mean a challenge to two of her own presumptions: (1) that her students have an obligation to speak, to contribute to the ongoing conversation of the courses in which they are enrolled; but that--in the open system of the internet, where there are no limits on time or space taken up by an individual postings--(2) students need not speak responsively, or be accountable for making sure that their thinking aloud connects with that of others.

She had been holding her students responsible, in other words, for sharing their thinking openly with others, but not for making sure their thinking was targeted to address the concerns of other students in her courses. Inviting alumnae into these conversations unsettled Anne's presumptions about both the costs and benefits of a-synchronicity in intellectual conversation. She had assumed that the alumnae and students would enjoy, as she does, thinking and writing out thoughts on-line, without any particular expectation of response. She was surprised to learn how problematic that assumption was.

Early in the semester, several alumnae began to decry the on-line postings (which Anne had seen as thoughtful reflections on and extensions of the class material) as self-centered and excluding. One alumna commented on-line that "I do not get the sense of a 'thread' or sharing of thought. As I read the posting of students/alums, each seems to be a brief independent essay." Another agreed: "it seemed to me it was a collection of independent essays, each one vying to see how impressive and academic it could be. There was no sense of a forum or conversation." A third confessed: "as my participation dropped off, my discontent, rather than diminishing, increased" as she listened to "shrill voices, nervous illogic, even a few banged doors and noses."

These alumnae were looking, in short, for the kind of engaged and responsive community that the on-line forum, experienced alone, without a classroom of in-person interactions, was neither designed nor equipped to offer. The alumnae's sense of excitement about the course, one of them reported, was accompanied by "its parallel gnawing intimidation--wondering if everyone else in the class didn't already know whatever

you happen to be studying!” This phenomenon, which she had first experienced forty-five years before as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr, was exacerbated now by the absence of any in-class experience.

Such critiques aggravated the unease of some of the undergraduates with the ever-expanding experiment that this course had become. Some of the students had trouble adjusting to the idea of sharing their thinking on-line. When Anne proposed that their in-class conversations also be made available as podcasts for the alumnae, the undergraduates agreed hesitantly. One of them asked in the on-line course forum whether they could not “have any place for private conversation?” Another student reported in the forum that

over the course of the semester, I had decided to stop commenting on the weekly blogs. I, like many of the alum, felt that there was no conversations taking place and felt more comfortable speaking my mind in a classroom where debates could be started and responses were immediate. I felt that many people in the class were either summarizing the texts to prove that they had read them, or using personal testimony to discontinue conversations.

Another of the undergraduates observed on-line, “I’ve been vaguely displeased that the alums were not participating in the best way available, but it didn’t occur to me that the best way may not seem to be a very good way at all.”

Such queries about the shared responsibilities of the alumnae and undergraduates were not limited to the virtual domain. In one class, Anne found herself urging her students to “be more generous,” even suggesting that a reticence to share their thinking with others might be construed as “selfish.” Afterwards, the alumna who had joined the class in order to record the podcasts wrote in the forum to “vigorously disagree”:

The idea of equating generosity with participation in public conversation doesn’t address the disparity of costs to the individual. While someone with an extroverted personality would incur almost no costs in speaking up and speaking out in the world, someone with an introverted personality would incur extraordinary costs for the same act. . . . Must we expect all feminists to perform public acts that are excruciating? Why can’t our diversity inform our definitions, acts and movement?

This posting was met with on-line thanks and the comment that it “probably meant a lot to all the introverts in the class.” Here was surprise indeed, the unexpected result of the juxtaposition of Anne’s decision to make her course a more “open” system—by inviting alumnae to participate, and by making class conversations publicly available—in tension with her established system of expecting contributions that, it seemed, privileged extroversion. Even the on-line forum, which she had assumed would offer introverts a place and time for thinking aloud, seemed, in practice, better suited to extroverts.

Anne’s challenge to her students to be more “generous” in sharing their thinking with one another, without expecting a response, was met with the suggestion that both the costs and potential benefits of public conversation might vary among different kinds of thinkers. She is still thinking about how she might profit from this surprising instruction. How might it influence her future planning? What difference would it make, Anne has come to ask, if she and her students could conceive of their object of study (the world, or any slice of it--whether it be literary, psychological or political) as an open system in which the aim of exploration would render the need for response by others unnecessary—or at least secondary?

What would happen then, in particular, to current forms of educational assessment? For starters, they would become responses that join and extend, or diverge from and diversify, the conversation, rather than function as comments explicitly aimed at evaluating student contributions to the class. They would also treat diversity as a resource. Rather than simply tolerating it as process/product approaches to assessment tend, at best, to do, they would rather seek out diversity, as it was sought in this course, where the different positions, and accordingly different insights, of alumnae and students, of introverts and extroverts, were of such value: not to be measured against one another, but as a means of enlarging the conversation.

#### **IV. Lucky Action in the Borders**

The blueprint signaled...the idea of a thing made complete in conception before it is constructed....A positive embrace of the incomplete is absent in the blueprint; forms are resolved in advance of their use....This is a closed knowledge-system.  
(Sennett, 2008, p. 26)

Our second story of surprise was about the commons that is a college course, in which many people (including those who joined the class only via the Internet) agreed to engage in shared time, space, and

projects. In this third story, the point of intersection is located outside of the formal site of the classroom, in a deliberately constructed middle zone in which the College is both an institution of learning and a workplace. At this intersection, students and staff members interact not according to their prescribed campus roles—as sociology major, for example, or housekeeper, administrator, public safety officer, chef—but as teachers and learners finding their way together along new paths.

These interactions are fostered by the College's Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLI), a cluster of projects where the goal is to build community through fostering faculty, staff, and student collaborations in various experiences of teaching and learning. The TLI was created in 2006 when administrators, members of the Board of Trustees, and a small group of faculty took stock of the teaching and learning opportunities afforded faculty and staff on campus and decided to create an initiative through which students choose to work with faculty, staff members, and one another as educational partners rather than in a traditional teaching and learning center. The TLI aims to help realize the College's democratic ideals by positioning students as knowledgeable, well-informed participants in the educational endeavor, and by including "non-academic" employees of the College as participants in, rather than solely as supports for, the educational endeavor. Through the TLI, roles are blurred, shared, and con-fused (an intimate kind of intersectionality) to enable new relationships and new conceptions of education, accountability and creativity.

The faculty development work of the TLI is supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and encompasses a broad range of programs centered around student-faculty educational exchange, through which students serve as pedagogical consultants to faculty; this program brought the student consultant from the first story in this article into Anne's Critical Feminist Studies class. The TLI's staff education work entails a program of reciprocal teaching and learning on topics chosen by unique partnerships.

Referred to as the Empowering Learners Partnership, it is supported by the Offices of the Chief Administrative Officer and the Chief Information Officer at Bryn Mawr College (for details see Cook-Sather 2009, 2008; Lesnick & Cook-Sather, 2010; Lesnick, 2010).

Since the beginning of the TLI, 58 staff and 55 students have engaged in Empowering Learners Partnerships, teaching and learning together about topics wide-ranging as cooking, computer skills, jazz appreciation, house painting, digital photography, arts and crafts, study skills, research skills, writing,

Italian, and Islam. Partnerships generally run for a semester, with partners meeting two hours per week; members of the hourly staff are paid release time, and students receive a student wage. By creating a setting for the intersection of the educational journeys of a diverse range of community members, Empowering Learners Partnerships are one way among many for people to be one another's "lucky finds."

Staff and student partners have revised the Empowering Learners model according to their own situations and goals. One staff member offered to act as a teacher of jazz appreciation, but suggested that his daughter could assume the role of learner, with his student tutoring her in math and language arts. In part owing to a history that segregated the male members of the Facilities department from female students on campus, three members of Facilities suggested that they form a group partnership with three students. Two housekeepers recently requested that, in exchange for teaching cooking, a student might help them prepare for the US Citizenship exam.

A paradigmatic story of the ways in which such arrangements can sponsor surprise focuses on a partnership between Ron, a driver in the Transportation program, and Carly and Susanna, two seniors at the College. In offering to serve as a Tae Kwon Do instructor for a student, Ron explained, he would need to show her physically what to do; this could be awkward given their gender difference. While this challenge was not in itself surprising, Ron's frankness and leadership in suggesting a modification of the model based on the particular pedagogical conditions of teaching his proposed subject were. He proposed to resolve this awkwardness by working with two students rather than one so that they could practice the moves with one another, guided by him but not needing to engage in physical contact with him. Thus, from the very first, Ron stepped out of the role of silent service provider that he typically played as a bus driver at the College and, in a manner both candid and graceful, led the way to a design for the partnership that responded to contextual challenges without being shut down by them.

Another important surprise that this partnership occasioned was in the determination of an instructional setting. A second student was soon found, and the two assured Ron that they would be able to use a space in the College's fitness center with mats and room to maneuver. They typically brought a laptop there so that they could also instruct him in PowerPoint, without needing an additional venue. In a move that has become an oft-cited outcome of the TLI, a public space and resource of the campus became newly

accessible to staff members and students working together on a common, mutually defined project. While staff and students were working in many spaces on campus, few were in settings where the nature of the work itself is intersubjective and authorized by the individuals in question, rather than by their prescribed roles of employment.

Ron, Carly, and Susanna met for one hour each week to study Tae Kwon Do, and for another to study PowerPoint. The students also participated in weekly reflection meetings for all students working in partnerships with staff. At an end-of-semester celebration, Ron gave a PowerPoint presentation about his design of the Tae Kwon Do instruction. When he had asked each student to define her goals for learning Tae Kwon Do, Susanna said she hoped to become more physically graceful, while Carly sought a sense of greater physical empowerment. Although ours is a women's college with a longtime commitment to women's empowerment and mental and physical development, it was surprising to hear college-aged women speak openly with a campus community member about connections between their learning and their bodies. This partnership provided a setting in which these aspirations could be sought and voiced with simplicity and immediacy not easily found where concerns for status and achievement dominate. Ron's PowerPoint presentation demonstrated the ability of computer technology to capture humanistic collaborations. The voice Ron gained in this realm paralleled Carly's joyful declaration that she should have requested a mat for the end-of-term celebration, in order to demonstrate her ability to lift Ron, who is significantly larger than she, over her head.

Where do these stories get us in terms of the central argument of this article? Could not a wellness program in which students take Tae Kwon Do as a non-credit course meet their body image and empowerment goals just as well? Given his goals, why not counsel Ron to enroll in the Computing II course for staff members, whose curriculum includes PowerPoint? One answer lies in the process: Ron, Carly, and Susanna created their own course—and here it is helpful to recall Pinar's (2006) reminder that the term "curriculum" derives from the Latin, "currere," or the "course to be run" (p. 518). In *Empowering Learners* partnerships, each participant is a curriculum designer, free and bound to create and run, collaboratively, the course, which itself is unrepeatable, ungeneralizable, and an outgrowth of invention and surprise. It needs no outside assessment, because the measure of its achievement is embedded in the outcome of the shared

work. It confounds the project of applying an external, a priori assessment framework. What could be posited for measurement, and how would the units of measure be determined, before the course were built and run?

Assessment is central to Empowering Learners partnerships. Indeed, the weekly reflective meetings with students, the mid-term joint staff-student assessment discussion, end-of-term celebrations, and students' in-course analyses, all contribute to assessing the progress and value of the partnerships. The difference between these practices and conventional forms of assessment is that these take place within the flow of time and relationship, as gift exchange does, rather than in systems that go forward in isolation from the lifeworlds (Herman & Mandell, 2004) that they purportedly reflect. Further—and in sharp contrast to current models of assessment which work like a tailor's chalk marks on a suit to be fitted, or like badges affixed to individuals who carry them away from their context of action to be measured for future performance—these practices orient assessment towards collective transaction. Both the process and the point of assessment, in the context of Empowering Learners, is to inform practice, to re-enter ongoing interactions and relationships.

## **V. Beyond Recompense**

If, when you're thinking about what you want, you imagine the situations in which you'll need to remember it, you're more likely to succeed. Preparing your mind for a certain behavior increases, (by as much as fifty percent) the chance that you'll pull that behavior off.  
(Sherwood, 2009, n.p.)

How might we think differently about our teaching if we acknowledge that our deepest humanity is brought forward not when we act as choosers (or "professors"), but when we respond to circumstances we have not chosen, or to unforeseen combinations and effects of our choices and contexts? Might we constitute our courses—and our broader participation as teachers and learners on campus—as communities in the process of responding and exploring, rather than of working from predetermined questions? This question builds on the Freirean idea of students as problem-posers (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 84), rather than problem-solvers, and addresses the now familiar constructivist notion that knowledge is created, not discovered.

Recognizing surprise as central to learning makes it easier to embrace the complexity both of students' particular journeys and of their intersections with those of others. More thoroughly recognizing the surprising quality of these intersections might begin to loosen the hold of rigid proceduralism, the relentless sense of "first this, now that," which dominates formal education in the United States and many other parts of the world (Appaadorai, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2001). We might gain facility with the varieties of surprises different people encounter along their distinctive life paths. We might too create more interesting paths by sharing and working from the surprises together.

The archetypal image of surprise is that of the unanticipated yet perfectly directed gift. In an essay called "Given Time," Jacques Derrida (1992) describes how very difficult—perhaps impossible—it is to give real gifts, because they are all grounded in relationships that imply obligations, which can take the form of private charity or public entitlement. Derrida says that it is more than a coincidence of language that the English word we use for that point in time we call "now" is "the present" (p. 9), because the real gift we can give any one is to be here, now, in the present, free of past debts and future obligations. This evanescent, if not entirely possible, gift is the real gift (Derrida, 1992). Derrida claims that gifts unsettle closed systems. They do not expect the sort of exchange or reciprocity needed in a system where energy cannot be lost. Rather, they bring in something new from the outside, with no expectation of return: "Derrida argued that the true gift confounds economics because it neither demands nor expects recompense" (Bogost, 2007, p. 338).

We see it as a deep, spiritual challenge to re-conceptualize our teaching and learning as a gift in the sense that Derrida talks about, with "no certain knowledge about its successful delivery," and no demand or expectation of recompense for its having been given (Derrida, 1992, p. 167). Can we manage this in an educational system that expects account-ability—ability to account, to figure the cost and benefit of educational "treatments"? Can we find our way to gifts in teaching and learning that are absent the sense of demand that Derrida claims so detrimental to the true gift? Can we fashion such gifts through a collaborative, recursive process of give and take, without negotiating cost or reward? In our formal work as teachers, can we find our way into a kind of generosity without the structure of accounting that underlay Anne's expectation that her students be "giving," into the kind of generosity demonstrated in Alice's

Empowering Learners Partnerships? If we learn to do this, can it help us, and our students, to teach and live more in the present? Can it help us all be more alert to the lucky finds in our path, particularly as we follow those paths through all the institutions that surround our teaching and learning together?

In Chapter 8 of Charles Dickens' satiric 1854 novel *Hard Times*, Bitzer refuses to bargain with Mr. Gradgrind, toppling his teacher with the lesson he taught him:

It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything, or render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished, and the virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter.  
(Dickens, 2001, p. 461)

Like the work of Hyde (1998) and Derrida (1992), Bitzer's challenge to Mr. Gradgrind highlights the paradoxical concept of gift: it evokes a sense of excess, a refusal of exactitude, of calculation, of setting accounts. So much of this sort of calculation goes into our teaching, especially in the summary act of assessment. It is our argument here that what we need is not a measuring of input and output, but a recognition of what "fancy" has been aroused, what excess accessed, what lucky find found—which is of course not earned, not deserved, and so not calculatable. Calculation presumes a correspondence between input and output that not only neglects the inequities of social privilege and cultural capital, but also assumes a cause-and-effect that does not recognize the role of the unpredictable, and of the personal and idiosyncratic. The lucky find is a gift of the road the individual travels--and of the cultural commons we construct together. Some "knowing," in the sense of being able to assess what one sees, might well blind us to the lucky find. Other forms of knowing might make us better able to spot something valuable.

It is to such questions, and unexpected discoveries, that we finally turn.

## **VI. Revising "Expectations"**

There's a crack in everything,  
that's how the light gets in....  
(Cohen, "1992)

...the crack in the ice where the otters breathe....  
The teacher's failings in which the students ripen....  
(Hyde, 1988, n.p.)

The stories we tell in this article treat surprise variously: as accidental disclosure (the appearance of a student's essay that opened for us a view of intersection and a chance for conversation); as unforeseen uptake and import of an intentional opportunity (the creation within a course context of conditions hospitable to surprising exchange); and as central (an intentionally liminal space between formal and informal learning in which individuals plot unique paths of education). Our stories are of innovation, so surprise may seem particularly germane.

Yet even at its most traditional, study is always poised at the cliff's edge between something determined, defined, termed, and the free fall in open air. The most traditionally scholarly pursuits have cracks, open spaces, and surprises at their heart. This is part of the freedom integral to the liberal arts, indeed, to learning generally, and to change. How tight must the framework be, and in relation to this, how large the cracks? How to revise institutions and our relationships to and within them, so as to keep alive the surprise that fuels the beating heart of study and of community?

We have offered here three examples of such revisions, along with the argument that re-envisioning education as fundamentally about the lucky find, as the giving and getting of "real" gifts in various cultural commons. In reflection, we now think of this article itself as the creation of a new cultural commons, one more expansive than the one generally recognized on campus. To this cultural commons, we have brought not only the usual suspects – paying students and paid teachers – but also past inhabitants of this community – alumnae – as well as current employees who are not traditionally considered part of the project of knowledge making.

The pedagogical and curricular implications of these examples will of course have to be realized contextually in other sites; it would falsify our argument to offer specific instructions in our call to curricular and cultural workers to integrate a desire for surprise into all our academic communities. Again,

following McDermott & Varenne (2006), “We cannot begin to make change out there until we have made change in here, under the most local conditions, with ourselves, with those around us” (p. 29). Since surprise is fundamentally of the here and now, we offer fellow and sister teachers no specific instructions, but these more general encouragements:

- move towards a sense of instability and dynamism that accompanies surprise, rather than away from it, for fear of losing control;
- look for openings to surprise in the formulations of your pedagogical goals, projects, and practices;
- disclose and discuss surprises, both flummoxing experiences and lucky finds, with your colleagues and friends;
- create and refine your own discourse for educational practice that embraces the unknown, and the experience of not-knowing.

The recreation of the cultural commons brings with it a need to re-conceptualize the expectations of both teachers and the institutions within which they work. With the generous attitude we encourage here, the fear of falling short of expectations can be replaced with an expectation of exceeding them, or of going someplace else entirely. It is then that what we say to one another as teachers, colleagues, students, and co-workers can aim at continuing into the future, rather than at judging and weighing the past. We might prepare for such excess not by rejecting plan-ful pedagogies, but by pursuing them with a wide-angle lens on their incompleteness, their being exceeded by the presents of, and by our participation in, the commons that is our shared present..

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