Receiving the Gift of Teaching: From ‘Learning From’ to ‘Being Taught By’

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Abstract This paper is an enquiry into the meaning of teaching. I argue that as a result of the influence of constructivist ideas about learning on education, teaching has become increasingly understood as the facilitation of learning rather than as a process where teachers have something to give to their students. The idea that teaching is immanent to learning goes back to the Socratic idea of teaching as a maieutic process, that is, as bringing out what is already there. Against the maieutic conception of teaching I argue for an understanding of teaching in terms of transcendence, where teaching brings something radically new to the student. I explore the meaning of the idea of transcendence through a discussion of Kierkegaard and Levinas, who both criticise the maieutic understanding of teaching and, instead, argue for a transcendent understanding of teaching—an understanding of teaching which they refer to as ‘revelation.’ Whereas Kierkegaard argues that revelation—which he understand as a process of ‘double truth giving’—lies beyond the power of the teacher, Levinas interprets revelation as the experience of ‘being taught.’ I use Levinas’s suggestion in order to explore the distinction between ‘learning from’ and ‘being taught by’ and argue that teaching has to be understood in the latter sense, that is, in terms of the experience of ‘being taught.’ To connect the idea of teaching to the experience of ‘being taught’ highlights that teaching can be understood as a process of ‘truth giving’ albeit that (1) this ‘gift’ lies beyond the powers of the teacher, and (2) the truth that is given, has to be understood in terms of what Kierkegaard calls ‘subjective truth’—which is not relativistic truth but existential truth, that is, truth that matters for one’s life. Understanding teaching in these terms also opens up new possibilities for understanding the role of authority in teaching. While my argument implies that teachers cannot simply and straightforwardly ‘produce’ the experience of ‘being taught’—so that what matters has to do with the conditions under which the gift of teaching can be received—their actions and activities nonetheless matter. In the final section of the paper I therefore argue that if we want to give teaching back to education, we need to resist the depiction of the teacher as a disposable and dispensable ‘resource’ that students can learn from or not, and need to articulate and enact a different story about the teacher, the student and the school.
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“To give a gift is to give something that you don’t have.”
(Derrida, quoted in Caputo and Vattimo 2007, p. 135)

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”
(Matthew 24:42)

“I just can’t get you out of my head.”
(Kylie Minogue)

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 theoretically 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 not just operates as a learning theory or an epistemology, but also, and first and foremost, as a pedagogy. Virginia Richardson 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 learning 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 adopts 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 Paradigm’ 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 instruction 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 which is part of a wider ‘learnification’ of educational discourse and practice (see Biesta 2010)—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. 1 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 it correctly this has even led to a certain embarrassment amongst teachers about the very idea of teaching and about their identity as a teacher. 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. 2

The issue that interests me in this paper, therefore, has to do with the impact of constructivist thinking (conceived in the broad sense outlined above) on teaching. I am not only interested in its impact on the practice of teaching, but also its impact 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.

My ambition with this paper is not only to explore the role of the idea of ‘transcendence’ in thinking about teaching and education. I also intend to make some room for the idea of ‘transcendence’ within the conversation of educational philosophy and theory itself. In my view a certain notion of ‘transcendence’ has been lurking behind the scene in many recent discussions in the field. Most of this, however, has been couched in secular language, particularly though references to ‘the other’ and ‘the otherness of the other,’ and also through more abstract notions such as ‘hospitality,’ ‘the trace’ and ‘différence’ (see, for example, Biesta and Egéa-Kuehne 2001; Todd 2003; Miedema and Biesta 2004; O’Bryne 2005; Egéa-Kuehne 2008; Ruitenberg 2011; Papastefanou 2012). While the other does

1 I wish to emphasise that the phenomenon that forms the occasion for my reflections in this paper 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 analysing nor criticising 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 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 I am, of course, referring to a particular idea of education, one that involves an educator, that is, someone who (aims to) educate which, in the context of the school, would be a teacher (but in the context of the family would be a parent). The point I will try to explore throughout this paper is for a teacher to be a teacher he or she needs to teach something, that is, needs to bring something new to the situation and this, as I aim to demonstrate, is radically different from just facilitating the process of learning.

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indeed transcend the self, and while hospitality does indeed open the door for the event of the arrival of what Derrida would call ‘the impossible’—understood as that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility—there is perhaps more to the idea of transcendence than meets the eye, and it is this ‘excess’ that I am interested in for this paper as well.\(^3\)

### 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 (see below), 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\(^4\)—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.\(^5\) Socrates’s 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

\(^3\) I am aware that this exploration takes me in a direction which some may find difficult to give a place within the conversation of philosophy of education, as it implies engagement with religious language and theological argument. Some of this difficulty stems from the way in which the realm of meaning and rationality has been circumscribed in the Western world from the Enlightenment onwards—and, in a certain way, already well before the advance of the Enlightenment (see Caputo 2006, pp. 55–83). In this configuration religion has generally ended up as the other of meaning, the other of rationality and even the other of reason, resulting in a dualistic way of thinking that still exerts a powerful influence in our times. I do not wish to dismiss the reasons that have led to the construction of this set up, not in the least because much that has happened in the name of religion is indeed deeply problematic. But that does not mean that everything that has happened in the name of religion is automatically bad, just as not everything that has happened in the name of such notions as ‘democracy’ or ‘humanity’ is automatically and unequivocally good (see Biesta 2006). My ambition with this paper—an ambition which, within the limited space available, I will not be able to fulfill at the level of argument, but hope to be able to demonstrate in the way in which the argument is ‘performed’—is, in a sense, to transcend the particular way in which the realm of meaning and reason has been carved up, so that engagement with religious language and theological argument is no longer a matter of jumping over the fence of reason, but is part of overcoming—and perhaps even refusing—the very way in which this fence has been constructed in the first place.

\(^4\) The learning paradox is the predicament posed by Meno as to how one can go looking for something when one doesn’t know what one is looking for, and how can one recognise 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.” (Plato’s *Meno*, translated by Benjamin Jowett. Project Gutenberg EBook: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1643/1643-h/1643-h.htm; last accessed 5 June 2012).

\(^5\) 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.
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 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 “(t)eaching 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 which it already contains’” (Todd 2003, p. 30). This is why she concludes that “(t)he 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.; see also Biesta 2009).

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 Biesta in press). This is why I would disagree with the statement from Castoriadis, quoted by Todd, in which he argues that “(t)he 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 2010, 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 not 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’ transcendent. 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 called Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue (Westphal 2008). 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 decentering 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 our discussion is that Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, explores the idea of revelation through a discussion of the Meno, focusing on the question whether it is possible to think of teaching outside of, and different from, the idea of maieutics (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), “(w)hat 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 ‘double truth 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 which 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 from 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 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 1998), 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—on what, 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 “(t)eleological suspension does not eliminate; it relativizes” (ibid.).

Westphal provides a strong argument, based on his reading of Levinas’s essay “God and Philosophy” (Levinas 1998, 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—who 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 1998, p. 56)—Levinas tries to keep a place for a
meaning “beyond being” (ibid., p. 57). This does not require that philosophy brings 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 is 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, of course, 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 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. The educational interest, after all, is precisely an interest into the coming into the world of what is uniquely and radically new (see Biesta2010, chapter 4; Winter 2011), 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 above, Levinas characterises 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 realise something that really entered our being from the outside. Such teachings often provide insights about ourselves and our ways of doing and being; insights 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. 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; and Saeverot this issue), 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 we thus have been taught.6

Is teaching thus understood still a matter of truth giving? I believe it is if, that is, we understand the truth that is given, the truth that is offered to us, not as objective truth but as what Kierkegaard calls subjective or existential truth (see Kierkegaard 1992). Subjective truth as the “truth that is true for me,” the truth “for which I am willing to live and die” (Kierkegaard 1996, p. 32), is to be understood as the truth that I have managed to give a place in my life, the truth that I have managed to appropriate, the truth that I have managed to receive, even more so if this truth is a difficult or inconvenient truth and, in that sense, an unwelcome truth. The difference between objective truth and subjective truth, then, is the difference between a set of propositions which I assert to be true—and here “what is reflected upon is not the relation [between the knower and the truth] but that what [the knower] relates himself to” (Kierkegaard 1992, p. 199)—and a truth I have appropriated, a truth that I have managed to give a place in my existence—so that what matters is “the

6 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 ‘pay back’—see also note 8 below.
individual’s relation” (ibid.) to the truth. This is about how the individual relates to the truth, as Climacus puts it, rather than what the individual relates to. The difference between objective truth and subjective truth, therefore, does not coincide with the difference between truth and falsehood or between objectivism and relativism, but has to do with the distinction between the theoretical and the existential, that is, between what is true and what matters. Since in the theoretical plane we can always ask further questions, we can always discover that what was considered to be objectively true turns out to be not so—which is how we can understand the ongoing ‘quest for certainty’ that is called ‘science’—subjective truth is neither a relation to objective truth nor to relative truth but to what Climacus characterises as “an objective uncertainty” (ibid. p. 203).7

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 Neil (1966), conflates freedom with license, and assumes that the promotion of freedom means that anything should go. The educational question—unlike the learning question (see Biesta 2010)—is not about doing what you want to do, but entails an encounter 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).8

Giving Teaching Back to Education

This paper 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

7 Caputo (2007, pp. 61–62) explains the difference as follows: “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 persona 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 and idea of the ‘true God’ and having a ‘true relationship to God.’ Here the how of the relationship is all.”.

8 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 1992).
if teaching is to be more than just the facilitation of learning or the creation of learning environments, it needs to carry with it a certain notion 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 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. 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 the educational ‘project’ always needs to engage with its own impossibility (see Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2001; Biesta 2004; Green 2010; Gough 2010) and thus needs to proceed with a sense of irony (see Saeverot this issue). 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 emphasised, 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 the constructivist ‘common sense’ about teaching, where 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 2011).
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 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.

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