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Passive Education

This paper does not present an advocacy of a passive education as opposed to an active education, nor does it propose that passive education is in any way 'better' or more important than active education. Passive education is instead described and outlined as *an education which occurs whether we attempt it or not*. As such, the object of critique for this essay are forms of educational thought which, through fate or design, exclude the passive dimension, either within or outside of formal educational settings. An underlying component of this argument is therefore also that education *does* occur outside of formal educational settings and that, contra Gert Biesta and his critique of 'learnification' (2010 and 2012), we may gain rather than lose something by attending to it *as* education.

To have one's teaching or learning marked by a passive disposition is totally at odds with the contemporary logic of education which values activity itself as the ultimate measure of educational engagement. Every text included on a syllabus must have a prescribed purpose, rather than being presented as an object for passive learning: a means to let another voice in, without the aim of converting it into something for one's own use. Even 'experiential' or play-orientated models of education are reliant on activity and easily assessable progress. 'Experiential' education requires activity and purposefulness from the student and the teacher. Passive education, on the other hand, can change us without us quite knowing how or in what way. It might only change us for a little while – our perceptions, our sense of self, our internalised hierarchies of value – but this change is itself an education: a passive education. Anecdotally the passive education that art and literature

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often offers might be one of the reasons why so many students dislike studying texts or art they have enjoyed because it imposes a formal narrative which 'educatively' invalidates their own passive educational experience. The same is true of any educational experience superficially reduced to a particular purpose. But its odd disharmony of purpose and excess of purpose is why literature and art is especially important in education. Of course there are many repeatable physical or metaphysical gestures which continue to work within given structures and for many this would be considered education's primary or crucial social function.

However, if education is for *all* intents and purposes the researching, teaching and learning of repeatable gestures (even if these gestures were broadened to include the acquisition of repeatable affects) it would never be conceivable outside of the logic of the subject and the telos. Thus the deconstruction of the self-present subject and anything like a simple relationship with the 'other,' is, in terms of education, a pointless theoretical gesture, which has no practical value. In educational theory there is almost always a subject which learns (about) objects. Subjects are conceived of as learning about the world through a reduction of theirs and others' experiences of it to knowledge; preferably recallable knowledge. In education there is also often thought to be an operation of power, wherein the subject's power reduces the object to their knowledge or the object's power imposes a certain knowledge on the subject. But what if both subject and object were also conditioned by the 'power' of passivity and subject to passive educational experience? **And what if passive educational experience could be shown to constitute a large part of *all* experience?** Could educational structures respond to it, protect it, preserve it, without reducing it to being 'purposeful', without holding it to account? And, if passivity is a given, would they even need to?

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Although this paper does not intend to promote it against an 'active' or formal education, a consciously passive education would be more attuned to the accidental imprint, the inspirational moment, the absence of (self) certainty, the getting-carried-away by something outside of ourselves, *without* recourse to purpose, *without* the necessity of communicable and assessable reflection, *without* quantifiable linear progress or development. It is perhaps not desirable to think of these things in terms of formal education. We might argue with Biesta that 'the point of education is never that children or students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn this for particular *purposes*, and that they learn this from *someone*' (2012, 36). But even if that is the case, this getting-carried-away happens every day and yet we almost always teach in opposition to this fact and do not recognise it. Passive education has no prescribed 'point' or 'purpose' and it occurs even if we do not explicitly practice it.

It might seem as if Jacques Rancière's example of Jacob Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* would provide the model of a passive teacher who does not instruct, given that he emphasized the emancipatory qualities of education without explication and, in the most famous example of his teaching experience, could not speak the language of his students. However, I would argue that Jacotot is instead the instructor *par excellence*. The ignorant schoolmaster still knows precisely what is to be instructed and its value, even if he does not know the content of it himself. The master also continues to hold the student accountable: 'The ignorant master must demand from his student that he prove to him that he has studied attentively' (Rancière, 1991, p. 31). It is therefore possible to suggest that (in contrast the positions Rancière takes up elsewhere) the ignorant schoolmaster might in fact be the ultimate neoliberal 'educator' or instructor: an accountant of attentiveness and effort, as well as a facilitator and attributor of value. He is not only able to instruct students in what is considered valuable to them without any prior knowledge of the

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subject – which means that the education of the educator would be extremely time and cost effective – in the name of equality he judges them not on their ability but on their attentiveness. This means that almost the entire responsibility for educational success is transferred onto the effort of the student, without any sensitivity to individual context or interest. Although this is not the place to discuss them, there may also be interesting correlatives between the logic of ‘equal intelligences’ and that of ‘equality of opportunity’. That aside, the development of the values of attention, effort, autonomy and individual responsibility become the underpinning objects of instruction. The ignorant schoolmaster is not passive but rather actively attending to the attention given to the work, so that you can learn its meaning and so that it has value. Without arguing that it is socially preferable, it possible to suggest that passive teaching would not expect or attempt to account for meaning, value, or attention. Passive teaching would be practiced without purpose or intention: *If it strikes you....if it doesn't...*

John Dewey's emphasis on the democratic and experiential components of education might suggest him as an unlikely subject of critique in terms of the distinction between instruction and teaching. However, because his thinking requires the predicates of a self-present subject and a self-present community, which both progress in a linear and dialectical fashion, disposing of that which is not of value to this forward movement, Dewey leaves no room for that which is of significance without being of value. He leaves no room for passivity or passive teaching. For Dewey, the teacher is able to instruct in the values of the community as well as in a discrete subject area. In *How We Think*, Dewey describes the difference between the instructor and teacher as beginning at ‘the point where communicated matter stimulates into fuller and more significant life that which has entered by the straight and narrow gate of sense perception and motor activity’ (Dewey, 1910, p. 224). For him, ‘genuine communication involves contagion’ and the production of a ‘community of thought

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and purpose between child and the race of which he is the heir' (Dewey, 1910, p. 224). In Dewey's reading, the distinctive duty of the teacher as opposed to the instructor is the ability to be able to contaminate the child with the thought and purpose of the community. This emphasis on the teaching of communal thought and purpose is antithetical to passive teaching. The contamination of the individual with shared social thought and purpose is simply another form of social instruction or indoctrination. The teacher as contaminator has little or nothing to do with passive teaching. Reading Dewey's description into Rancière's, far from emancipating the students, Rancière's Jacotot contaminates his students with the self-reliance and personal responsibility now key to neoliberal conceptions of education. Conceptions which focus on agency, activity and productivity.

Unlike Dewey, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida are more wary and often directly critical of the concept of community, thereby putting one of Dewey's main ends for education into question. Dewey's biological metaphor of communal contagion can be read alongside Derrida's insistence on the auto-immunity implicit in individuals and communities, without which 'nothing would ever happen or arrive' (Derrida, 2004, p. 152). For Derrida individuals and communities exist because of their non-presence to themselves and auto-immunity is concerned with the maintenance of non-self-certainty and openness to the always unexpected arrival of the other; an other which is not necessarily or even commonly 'another person' but rather that which one cannot already conceive of or invent within a singular context. The openness to the coming of the other is a passive openness. The passive aspect of what might also be called and auto-immune teaching would then emphasise that the subjects of Dewey's communal contagion must remain open to thought and experience which exists outside of the thought and purpose of their communities or even themselves. Because, in Derrida's reading, both the individual and the community are conditioned by auto-immunity there is no pure community, only auto-co-immunity or the auto-immunity we all

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have in common. To be immunised is to be closed off towards that which could change or put in to question the self-present individual or community. In this sense, Dewey's contagion would ironically also be a form of immunisation. Or to read it another way, Dewey's contaminatory education takes advantage of and perhaps abuses the condition of auto-immunity. In these terms, his model of education would be to contaminate the students with something which then shuts others out by immunising against their influence. Thus the job of Dewey's teacher would be to immunise the student against that which exceeds the communal. Derrida would not only think this is existentially impossible but also politically suspect. Auto-immunity means that students can be affected and *infected* at any time. It also means that what they think or who they think they are can be destroyed by their very own thought. This 'very own' thought might come as if from elsewhere.

The aspect of teaching which is separable from instruction is that which attends to the disposable in terms of the dialectic: that which cannot be reduced to the same by the dialectical movement. Only a view of teaching entirely eclipsed by instruction and the marking of valuable signs would see the educational process as fundamentally dialectical. Teaching, like all activity and experience, exceeds the dialectic and can exist without it. Dewey's Hegelian 'principle of the continuity of experience' implies, in his own words, that 'All ends and values that are cut off from the ongoing process become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences' (Dewey, 1992, p. 244). Passive teaching, on the other hand, is precisely concerned with these valueless arrests and fixations. For Dewey 'Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process' (Dewey, 1992, p. 244). I argue that not only is education not a linear process but further that experience is not, in fact, a process at all. A

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conception of experience as process is tied into to the logic of the becoming-subject, where growth exists to facilitate further growth. **Passive education is not to do with purposeful growth but experience.** It might even be possible to say it is **not actively 'to do' with anything. It is at the** very least marked by the trace of a certain *disinterest*. This concept of disinterest also poses problems to Dewey's insistence on interest as being the key determinate in education. The same might be said of Rancière's Jacototian desire to hold students to account for their attentiveness. It is perhaps no surprise that *Democracy and Education*, unlike *How We Think*, seems to make no distinction between instruction and teaching; the terms both being used seemingly to represent the same thing (Dewey, 1916). The meaning of teaching as educational relation, in a passive, inattentive, disinterested, patient way, which 'lets other be other', that is what still might be distinguished from instruction.

Passive teaching is best defined alongside Maurice Blanchot's concepts of patience, inattention and passivity. **While Dewey defends a community of thought and purpose, and Rancière's Jacotot prizes attention,** Maurice Blanchot argues for a passive inattention,

which, beyond any interest or calculation, lets other be other, leaving them outside the sphere of the violence by which they would be caught, grasped, snared, identified, reduced to sameness. This inattention is not the attitude of an I more attentive to self than to others; it distracts me from myself and this distraction strips the "I," exposes it to the passion of the utterly passive, where, with the eyes that are open but that look not, I become infinite absence. Then even the affliction that cannot endure to be seen and which vision cannot endure, lets itself be considered, approached, and perhaps calmed. But this inattention

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remains ambiguous: either scorn so extreme it disdains to appear, or the extreme of discretion, offered to the point of effacement (Blanchot, 1986, p. 53-54)

This passive inattention is the disposition with which I would like to begin to construct the notion of the passive teacher: a teacher who lets other be other and who might *efface themselves* in their teaching relation. In practical (as well as moral or ethical) terms, the passive teacher is in no way precluded from *also* being an 'active' teacher, who attends to prescribed purpose and attention, but they would also be conscious of other qualities. The passive teacher would then to a certain extent not only *pay attention to the students' attention* but also create an educative relation through self-effacement; which might be the students' as much as their own. This is not to say that the teacher's presence becomes somehow insignificant or arbitrary but rather that it, in Blanchot's definition of master-student relation from the first chapter of *The Infinite Conversation*, 'reveals a singular structure of interrelational space' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 5). This makes it so that

the distance from student to master is not the same as the distance from master to student – and even more, making it so that there is a separation, a kind of abyss between the point occupied by the master, point A, and the point occupied by the disciple, point B: a separation that will hereafter be the measure of every other distance and every other time. Let us say more precisely that the presence of A introduces for B, but consequently also for A, a *relation of infinity* between all things, and above all in the very speech that assumes this relation. The master is destined, then, not to smooth out the field of relations but to upset it, not to facilitate the paths of knowledge, but above all to render them not only more difficult, but truly impracticable (Blanchot, 1993, p. 5-6)

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It is the relation itself which is, first and foremost, educative, precisely because it upsets the smoothness of all relations and reveals any and all paths to knowledge as difficult and impracticable. This educative relation between master and student, marked by the disposition of passive inattention, is conditioned by the unknown, or what Georges Bataille would call 'non-knowledge' (Bataille, 2001). Knowing is always in relation to the unknown; knowledge is always in relation to non-knowledge. The relation of the known and unknown between master and student is an 'irrelation', which is to say, an 'exorbitant relation' and a 'relation of infinity' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 6-7). The unknown that the teacher represents to the student draws the student towards the infinite and away from certainty. This relation is passive and not active. It is the teacher's existence rather than their activity that facilitates this relation, which is not commensurable and has no 'common measure' or 'common denominator'. The individuals in relation are not reducible to that relation because it is an irrelation: a relationship between master and student in Blanchot's terms is where *they cannot relate to one another except in their inability to do so*. This relation has an 'index of "curvature" such that the relations of A to B will never be direct, symmetrical, or reversible, will not form a whole, and will not take place in a same time; they will be, then, neither contemporaneous nor commensurable' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 6). The passive relation between A and B, master and student, provokes educational experience: an un-purposeful education towards infinity and the unknown.

A classroom marked with passive inattention experiences an intensity which exceeds conceptual formulation in terms of its purpose. The outcomes of this experiential and un-purposeful learning are unforeseeable. To say that there is always something more that it is possible to learn is banal but the fact that this is the case means little outside of an educative relation. It is the educational relation itself which brings out the experience of this learning. With a passive teacher it

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becomes apparent that one can learn from: reading a text without there being any prescribed reason for doing so; conversing without any expected outcome; experimenting with words, images, technologies or practices in such a way as to let the experience itself dictate the educational outcome, where 'the very *interruption* of relations is nothing other than hearing speech and learning to speak' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 6). The passive educational context creates a space of intensity where learning is not only possible but provoked. This intensity, 'generally escaping conceptualization', is not the lesson itself – there is no educational *revelation* – but is rather an experience where the 'disastrous attractiveness' of 'exteriority' returns to interiority (Blanchot, 1986, p. 56-57). This is the disastrous attractiveness of passive educational experience, where learning something which cannot be predetermined and cannot be made 'whole' is possible. In contradistinction to Dewey's focus on the communal values associated with thought and purpose, and Rancière's focus on attention, is passive education. A passive education marked by an inattention that Blanchot finds to be necessary in friendship 'which has passed leaving no trace' (Blanchot, 1986, p. 27) and 'lets other be other' (Blanchot, 1986, p. 53) rather than holding them to account for their attentiveness, or contaminating them and reducing them to the same.

Many literary writers (as well as visual artists and musicians) show educative experience as passive. In many literary texts' characters are passively educated and in the works of writers such as Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Susan Howe, existence itself, and the very subjectivity of their 'protagonists' or characters in and as existence, can be read as passive: they don't make themselves or aren't made primarily through active decisions, rather experiences make them. The passive aspect of the relation they have to existence is not always what would usually be called educative, even if it changes them, how they think, and what they think about. The distinction I draw here between educational experience and non-educational experience is that in an

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educational experience learning is conscious and consciously incomplete. To sit in a schoolroom and learn nothing is not to have an educational experience, passive or otherwise. It is possible to learn something unconsciously but it is not possible to be educated unconsciously, as education requires conscious reflection on the experience of learning, **even if that experience would be impossible to communicate.**

Art and literature can also present the opportunity for a passive educational relation. The artist or writer's work can represent (and in a way, *is*) the master in the master-student relation. This educational relation is no less real than that between a teacher and student in a classroom, and can frequently be a *more* educational relation. Like a passive teacher, a novel can be educative if it keeps the reader in relation to the unknown. However, a detective novel, for example, would not necessarily be educative simply because it revealed previously unknown information along the way. This is because the knowledge is compartmentalised in terms of the logic of the novel: the 'killer', for example, is initially unknown to the reader but becomes known within the confines of the novel. When the novel is finished the relation to the unknown has been removed. This is not the case in a novel (or a relation to a novel – including a detective novel) which might pose existential, social, aesthetic, political or psychological questions which extend beyond its narrative structure. The novel does not actively have to pose these questions but the educational space it helps to create might provoke **them. A novel can become part of a relation with the reader which** cannot be 'completed' but only abandoned or forgotten. The novelist B.S. Johnson provides a strong definition of the writer as master in relation to the reader in the introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*:

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For readers it is often said that they will go on reading the novel because it enables them, unlike film or television, to exercise their imaginations, that that is one of its chief attractions for them, that they may imagine the characters and so on for themselves. Not with my novels; it follows from what I have said earlier that I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured out of his own imagination. How is he supposed to grow unless he will admit others' ideas? If he wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books. That may be thought to be anti-reader; but think a little further, and what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing. (Johnson, 1973, p. 28)

As a master, Johnson is not presenting any particular knowledge but is rather provoking the reader into a relation which would not be the same as his. He is 'active' in his assertion of the limits of interpretation of the text itself but passive in terms of the *purpose* his text has for the reader. The lesson he offers is not his own ideas, even if they are that which helps to form the relation between author and reader, master and student. The real lesson is the never completed provocation to prove ones' own existence, which is a lesson with a *complete absence of any content* beyond the provocation itself. In this way the novel is not simply an exercise in imagination but rather the creation of an educational relation which exceeds what the novel can present. As well as fulfilling its active role, the novel also acts as passive point A in the educational relation to a passive point B, the reader. It presents the opportunity, not only of an imaginative experience but of a passive educational experience. Clearly, reading a novel is not the same kind of educational relation as

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attending a class with a teacher present. A published novel is, in simple terms, a monologue, which stops and starts with the reader. A passive teacher in a classroom would not have to present a monologue with no invitation for response to create an educational relation, although they might. The passive teacher provokes without inviting. In the same way, a reader might be provoked to make notes, change jobs, seek out an experience, sketch drawings or write poems during the experience of reading a novel. In a more complicated sense, the very process of writing a novel can be an educational experience and exemplary of an educational relation. This is the case because it is possible for the master-student relation to exist within oneself. This possibility helps to illustrate the limitations of thinking a self-present subject, especially within the context of education. The self that is written is not the self that writes. And, in terms of an educational relation, the written self (even if it is not yet written), is the master, while the writing self is the student. The passive teacher in the classroom also learns through the process of self-presentation. Teaching is also an opportunity for learning for the teacher, although point A and point B are not the same (or even the same in reverse) as the 'actual' master-student relation.

B.S. Johnson's novel *House Mother Normal: A Geriatric Comedy* is constituted of separate experiences of 'internal' consciousness in relation to the same event. It is set in an old people's home and presents these narrative experiences of (mostly linguistic) consciousness across one evening. As such the novel presents a particularly innovative form of educational relation to the reader. Through its content, as well as its form, *House Mother Normal* is a particularly interesting example of possibilities for passive education because it presents characters who are almost as far removed from formal education as possible. What the characters learn does not easily lend itself to being considered of social value, especially, as the House Mother tells us, they are 'NERs, since they have no effective relatives, are orphans in reverse' (Johnson, 2004, p. 5). The characters are also

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physically limited in the range of their experiences they can have in their day to day life, and, as such, might be superficially difficult to conceive as educative. And yet, it is their consciousness which reveals itself as passively educated. The House Mother provides an introduction to the eight narratives and then provides her own, temporally aligned with theirs, at the end. The narratives range from the verbose and self-reflective to sparse and disconnected Welsh words (Johnson, 2004, p. 162-175) and several blank pages (Johnson, 2004, p. 177-182) (which seem to indicate the death of one of the NERs). Their consciousness is often interrupted/constituted by 'external' elements and sometimes words that come to mind and take them in different directions, stealing them away, as if the words themselves were external rather than internal (an experience that Derrida reports as the condition of general writing and non-self-presence (Derrida, 1998)). The opposition presented to the reader, between the NERs, who are 'abnormal' and the house mother, who is 'normal', is dramatically challenged at the end of the novel, when it is revealed that the House Mother has been putting on a show for the residents of receiving oral sex from a dog. This challenge to 'what is normal' is not simply a function within the content of the novel, but also to consciousness more generally. Many novels utilise the function of the 'unreliable narrator' but Johnson's goes much further, voiding the very idea of a 'reliable' narrator at all. Each narrative allows the reader a singular relation to the 'internal' unknown of what is happening at the nursing home, as well as facilitating an overarching educational relation to the unconditional unknown or infinite that exists at the edge of all educational experience. The novel is at once an engagement with old age, consciousness, memory, forgetting, truth, normality and abnormality, language (and its dissolution), illness, abuse, death, boredom, confusion, pointlessness and grief. While it 'actively' portrays all of these themes, it doesn't attempt to present a definitive description or interpretation of any of them, nor does it have an easily ascribable social or moral purpose. The wide variety of themes add to the difficulty of any

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clear path to knowledge the reader might think they have found. They create an educative relation precisely because they do not offer ready answers but rather present the infinity of the unknown. They also make a path to knowledge impracticable by removing the sure footing of educational progress and linear development of knowledge. The elderly inhabitants of the house are not enlightened or particularly able to utilise their knowledge to improve their own or others situations. These 'orphans in reverse' have the same kind of complex relations to language and knowledge that anyone of any other age might, albeit in addition to their mental or physical symptoms. The reader is presented with these internal monologues without any guidance, save for that of the House Mother, who is revealed to be very far from 'normal' by the end of the novel. The novel is then further subverted on the final page where the House Mother reveals herself to be 'the puppet or concoction of a writer' and that the novel is 'a diagram of certain aspects of the inside of his skull' (Johnson, 2004, p. 204). A diagram which acts as a passive point A in educational relation to the reader at point B. A diagram which itself is the result of an educational relation with its author at a different point B. A provocation to affirmation and change but with no expectations. An opening to the infinity which makes the passive educational relation possible.

Existence will continue to change but an educational relation can change how it changes. This can be done actively and passively, often at the same time. The House Mother's direction of the 'friends' in the home effects their existence in one direction rather than another, even if neither direction can be entirely predicted. The same is true of the teacher in the classroom. A lesson changes but each person involved changes how it changes through their own singular educational (or non-educational) relation to the teacher. And each person changes with those changes. I argue that *House Mother Normal* is an educational text because it presents and attends to incidences of existence which reveal how our consciousness changes passively, outside of our control; how we

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continue to learn as we get older; how the ways we learn to be need to change as we change; how those changes are affected by others; how the reader's consciousness exists in educational relation to those presented and perhaps realises itself also to be fractured, restless, obsessive, blank, banal, obedient and disruptive. Passive education isn't much about results or league tables, canons or discipline, social purpose, cramming facts or learning 'skills.' Nor is it only to do with the classroom practice of teachers and students. Of course it can be read into all these things but perhaps it is also interesting to learn from the aspects of experience that the structural forms of education *do not acknowledge*. Passive education is not about deconstructing education but rather learning from existence which exceeds structure. It is not a question of why this should happen. It is already happening to all of us. We receive passively every day. It is about becoming attuned to this passivity, realizing what is happening, affirming it, invoking it as part of our educational relations, while we can, for 'worse times are a-coming, nothing is more sure' (Johnson, 2004, p. 204), when it might no longer be possible to learn that we are learning or who we might be learning to be.

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