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“O my friends, there is no friend”: Friendship & Risking Relational (Im)possibilities in the
Classroom

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Abstract: In an era in which scholars have decried the ways schooling has become increasingly tied to the measurement of “objective” knowledge through reductive assessments, teaching and learning have become less humane. This essay theorizes that friendship might provide a way out of this dehumanizing trajectory for teaching and learning, opening up new, more humane relational possibilities between teachers and students. Using my own narratives to explore the (im)possibilities of thinking friendship in teaching, I draw on theorizing from various Continental thinkers (Derrida, Rancière, & Foucault) in order to make the case that aspects of friendship that are worthwhile—honesty, compassion, humanity—may never breach the surface of daily student-teacher relation without occasions of real vulnerability. Such risks are all the more beautiful for the humanizing possibilities they offer in these increasingly dehumanizing times.

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Classroom

Through, perhaps, another experience of the possible.

--Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*

In a recent piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rob Jenkins defines his relationship with his students: “I’m not your boss, your parent, or your BFF. I’m your professor.” His is a sentiment long echoed by teachers asserting their classroom authority and upholding the singular relationship of teacher and student over and against other ways of relating. As a teacher myself, I’m not sure how to square that with, as just one example, this letter from a former student, who did not hesitate to call me his friend (or mock me) in expressing his appreciation:

but seriously don't ever chase and become an
so tight boring teacher. You a great teacher
and friend

P.S You will never catch a pass on
me...

P.P.S your stance was better than [redacted]

GO FRISK!!!

Sincerely: [redacted]

I share this note, indulgent as it may be, to point to the very real ways in which students may look at teachers—whether teachers realize it or not, whether they like it or not—as friends. And while I take issue with Jenkins that, in varying ways, what professors and teachers do actually is at times bossy, parental, and friendly, I see his point. Friendship makes things tricky. When it starts to creep into the ways we teachers see students and the ways they see us, it can undermine our authority and, at worst, lead to scandal. Nevertheless, friendship may be of especial use in our current moment. In an era in which scholars across the spectrum of education research have decried ways schooling has become

increasingly tied to measurement of “objective” knowledge through reductive assessments (e.g., Giroux, 2011; Labaree, 2010), teaching and learning has become less human(e) (Grumet & Pinar, 2014; Paris & Winn, 2013). This essay theorizes that friendship might point to ways out of or around this dehumanizing trajectory. Friendship stands, in some sense, athwart history, able to do different things because of a relation that suggests teacher and student might engage with (and learn to like) the person in front of them, and worry about the testable later, if at all.

We typically understand friendship as “a close and informal relationship of mutual trust and intimacy” (OED). On a basic level, friends care about each other. They spend time interacting in ways that are mutually beneficial. Friendships usually take a period of time to develop—we typically don’t speak of having a friendship with a person without a series of enjoyable experiences with them; friendships emerge and are maintained by continued mutual experience and affection. The novelist Elie Wiesel (1995) explains, “friendship is never anything but sharing” (p. 27). Because of the reciprocal nature of this sharing, we also typically speak of friends as equals. I don’t mean this absolutely—a friendship certainly does not erase the differences between people—but rather during the act of communicating as a friend we typically don’t speak from a place of superiority or inferiority. This makes a friendship a safe(r) space for honesty and vulnerability: as Emerson (1982) remarked, “it is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.” (p. 195) There’s certainly much more to this normal understanding of what constitutes a friendship (not to mention the plurality of different ways of enacting friendship in practice) than I could hope to tackle here. Putting aside that general notion of the term, I focus on the aspects of friendship noted in the definitions above—care, equality, honesty, and vulnerability—as well as one specific notion: that friendship, understood as a relation of equality that affords honesty and vulnerability, *constitutes a risk* to the teacher-student relationship. Accordingly, the stories I share below should not be considered exemplars of instances of teacher-student friendship but rather as pointing to the risks

involved in the teacher-student relationship when aspects I've identified with emerge. As with any risk worth taking, friendship offers teachers something valuable: it harbors the potential for humanizing the relationship in a time of increasingly dehumanizing reform in schools.

This essay both builds on and moves away from the work of Burke and Greteman (2013), who offer an “ethics that allows teachers and students to maintain notions of mutual practice and appreciation borne of liking that asks very little other than respect and friendship.” (p. 168) Their conceptual framing of teaching contrasts ‘liking’ students with ‘loving’ them, the latter which, given the particular Christian notions of love they draw upon, may involve teaching in ways that deny students’ expressed interests for the sake of “what’s good for them”. For my part, I turn to Derrida, whose *The Politics of Friendship* (2005) theorizes the concept as a relational mode across history. I also draw on Rancière’s (1991) conceptualization of educational equality and Foucault’s (2008) notion of *parrhesia* to help think about what’s asked of students and teachers in attempting friendship. All this to demonstrate how we can learn other, different things when we consider the relationships between students and teachers through a lensing of friendship: the vicissitudes of contemporary schooling, the complexity of what Foucault (2005) calls “the relational world our institutions have so considerably impoverished” (p. 95), where (and who) we’ve failed in education, and how we might better attend to the human beings caught up in schooling. “The necessary consequence of this strange configuration [friendship in education] is an opportunity for thought” (Derrida, 2005, p. 7).

I begin with a history of the concept of friendship and how it’s been thought across the ages, drawing on Derrida’s own understanding as well as scholars of his work. I then provide an overview of scholarship on the concept as it’s been taken up in education specifically. Following that, I begin to theorize educational friendship in earnest, making use of an anecdotal method of theory-making (Gallop, 2002) in which I draw on two of my own stories in order to engage various aspects of friendship in the context of education: (1) Derridean friendship & reciprocity; (2) Rancierian

equality; (3) Foucauldian parrhesia and the risk of friendship. I conclude with a consideration of the usefulness of this theorizing of friendship in this moment in schools, suggesting future trajectories in education and research *through, perhaps, another experience of the possible*.

A Brief History of Friendship

One problem with studying friendship is: where-to-begin. The relation is undoubtedly ancient, co-extensive with our earliest days as a species living in community, and has such a vast history that writing it is incredibly intimidating. Friendship is also something everyone knows intimately, having friendships of their own. Nevertheless, it's useful to have context for understanding how scholars respond to that history; I'll attempt to provide that briefly here so we can think with them about friendship before moving into the realm of education specifically.

The intellectual history of friendship, according to Dallmyr (1999) can be understood as the story of its decline with the concurrent rise of individualism since antiquity. For the Greeks, friendship was valued as a fundamental relational mode at the heart of civic duty. The concept was inextricably political, undergirding democracy: "there is no democracy without the community of friends" (Derrida, 2005, p. 22). Aristotle wrote extensively of the worth of friendship, extolling it as "the ethical bond holding together a city or public regime" (Dallmyr, 1999, p. 105). (It's hard to think this today here in the U.S., where politicians are so often unabashedly partisan and self-interested, at best serving the narrow interests of their constituents with little obligation to the other side—we need only look at the revolving door of one-time "friends" of the current President who found they couldn't work with his administration). King (1999) notes that "Aristotle claimed to value friendship more highly than justice, on the assumption that, with the first, there is no need for the second." (p. 12). The primary feature of this Greco-Roman model of friendship was reciprocity: an exchange of mutual benefit for both parties. Friendship and the reciprocity it depended upon functioned as the foundation of politics in antiquity, providing an understanding of the relationship

between persons that made politics possible. Framing civic participation as an interaction between friends oriented the Greeks toward “politicist concord” (Derrida, 1988, p. 632), harmonious agreement which reciprocated the needs of equals within the polis.

Various social and cultural forces contributed to the declining status of friendship as a concept of intellectual interest: the growth of Christianity emphasized individuality in the man-God relationship; Cartesian philosophy, which came to undergird modern Western thought, centered the rational thinking-self at the expense of the collective; and subsequent liberal theory privileged the individual’s self-interest as the driving force of political and market economics (Dallmyr, 1999, p. 105). All of which downplayed the relationship between the self and others, making it seem less and less worthwhile to philosophize on the nature of a relational concept like friendship as opposed to individual concerns like existentialism, the psychoanalytic ego, identity, etc. We can see this history manifest in much of how we understand what it means to be a person today: in the individual vote, the emphasis on career and personal success, the spread of capitalism into contemporary global neoliberalism, and the decline of our collective institutions (public schools among them). Putnam’s (2001) seminal study of contemporary relationships in the U.S., *Bowling Alone*, finds that the social history of what it meant to grow up in the U.S. in the 20th century followed a similar trajectory, tracing the vibrant relational life of youth to the narrowing of relations in adulthood. As we go on, the thinking goes, we find less time for friendships in the midst of the important work of being our own person.

The purpose of providing this history is not to suggest a “one-dimensional story of social decline...grossly truncat[ing] the intricate complexity of the process” (Dallmyr, 1999, p. 106), though King (1999) argues it is a “defensible thesis that no major book on friendship has appeared since Cicero, 2000 years ago” (p. 12). Rather, I provide this narrative of decline in order to show

how a number of Continental thinkers saw in it an intellectual opening, “plac[ing] friendship...in a novel way on the intellectual agenda” (Dallmyr, 1999, p. 106).

Friendship & Teaching

An emphasis on the individual came to suffuse predominant approaches to teaching and learning as well. Thayer-Bacon (2004) argues “schools in America currently focus predominately on the outcomes and products of schooling. Often these are entirely disconnected from ...relational processes” (p. 168). A longstanding strain of curricular research disregards educational relations entirely, positioning students as separate individuals to be educated (e.g., Callahan, 1964; Tyler, 1969). When the subject of teacher-student relations is addressed, it’s often done in keeping with the common sentiment expressed by Jenkins above, familiar to many preservice teachers and teacher educators: “teachers should not be friends with their students.” This is backed by a raft of research on the importance of cultivating careful professional teacher-student relationships, particularly for high school students (e.g., Dika & Singh, 2002; Hughes et al., 1999; Midgley et al., 1989).

But through Derrida’s (1998) lens, friendship may be inevitable in any human relation, educational or otherwise, as a precondition for communication with another. This precondition consists of “the always already given presuppositions of being and discourse...which must be supposed so as to let oneself be understood” (pp. 635-636), what Derrida terms ‘minimal friendship’ or ‘preliminary consent’ or ‘friendship prior to friendships’ or an “anterior affirmation of being-together”¹ⁱⁱ (p. 636). Put differently, communicating with another requires a willingness to listen to them, and assumes they are worth listening to—this arrangement can be understood then as constituting a kind of friendship, as one person recognizing the good in communicating with another.

In addition, previous scholarship has asserted that friendship between teachers and students may not only be possible and already present, but desirable. Noddings (2005), for example, moves the conversation around educational relations to the possibilities of friendship. As she explains, the nature of friendship is that “friends wish the best to their friends *for the friends’ sake*. A friend does not seek something for himself in wishing the best for his friend.” (p. 102) For Noddings:

Friends point each other upward, and that is why friendship is so important to moral life. They do not stand by silently while their friends do things they believe are wrong...they have our best interests in mind. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Aristotle once said that whatever teaching does, it does *as to a friend*; that is, the teacher wants the best for her student for the student’s own sake. (p. 102)

Friendship in Noddings’ framing is valuable as an ethical relation undergirding her normative philosophy for how a person should relate to another. Ditto: teachers and students. In orienting themselves towards students as friends, teachers have the potential to enrich students’ moral lives, carrying on the Aristotelian tradition of friendship as the foundational principle undergirding the formation of persons in political, communal, and social spheres.

Still, Noddings is in the minority with respect to friendship between students and teachers, and we would do well to consider just why that is. Beyond professional concerns with the individual undergirding Tyler’s (1969) rationale for forsaking the relational, the specter of teacher-student sex also looms over the relationship. A bevy of high-profile scandals testify to the fascination of the media and public (at least in the U.S.) with any whiff of such erotic relations, so much so that the long-standing sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* has a recurring series of skits on the subject called “Teacher Trial”. Given the sensational tone of many of these stories and the SNL gag, it can seem easy to dismiss this as just another example of the sexual paranoia of a typically puritanical American public. And yet, with recent revelations of workplace sexual abuse brought to life by the

#MeToo movement, there seems good reason to be concerned about the possibilities of those in authority—corporate bosses, film directors, classroom teachers—to abuse a professional relationship. My own institution, for example, is currently fraught with the fallout from the systematic sexual abuse of hundreds of student-athletes by gymnastics team-doctor Larry Nasser. This is all a monstrously troubling story, and something I do not intend to take lightly here. Given more time, it would be worth building upon and complicating research that has long established the erotic (e.g., Garrison, 1994; McWilliam, 1999) nature of teaching, as an act of seduction, in order to consider the implications of the contemporary crisis in light of those theories. But to be clear, I am not interested in considering literal erotic relations between teachers and students in this essay. Rather, following Burke & Greteman (2013) via Foucault (1988), I take up friendship in teaching precisely to move around/beyond the sexual to see what kinds of relations are made possible.

Anecdotal Theory

More often than not, we know and remember our friends—we understand ourselves as having a *friendship*—through stories we tell others and ourselves about them. We recount trips taken, crises weathered, parties thrown and problems solved through narratives that constitute the stuff of friendship. When I give a toast at my best friend’s wedding in two months, I’ll tell a story about the time he visited me in Michigan and made a fool of himself in front of my colleagues, much (I’m sure) to the embarrassment of his wife and her family and to the great joy of my friends and myself. Theorizing with stories, then, was a natural fit for this essay. I knew that I wanted to make use of narratives because I have long been seduced by Hendry’s (2015) claim that “if inquiry (research) is understood as meaning making, then all inquiry is narrative” (p. 72). Part of the draw to stories is undoubtedly also due to my own history with the form; as a former English major and teacher, I’ve come to know things and people in and through stories and I feel comfortable working with them.

The stories I did end up writing are brief; you might even, perhaps derisively, say they're anecdotal. The approach I settled on takes up Jane Gallop's (2002) "anecdotal theory", in which she provides "short accounts of some interesting or humorous incident" (p. 2) and attempts to read them for the theoretical insights they afford. Importantly, "the anecdotes become 'interesting' precisely for their ability to intervene in contemporary theoretical debates." (p. 2) Here I'm interested in reading my own anecdotal recountings for their potential to intervene in contemporary understandings of teacher-student relationships, exploring in what ways aspects of friendship may or may not come to light in these stories. We might understand these anecdotes as 'exorbitant moments' that, "however literary, [are] nevertheless directly pointed towards or rooted in the real" (Fineman, 1991, as cited in Gallop, p. 3). This work assumes that the moment is central to theorizing "in a way that resists the norm" (p. 6). Importantly, I myself worry, along with critics, that such self-work might devolve into narcissism, nostalgia and self-indulgence. Hartman (2008) helps here:

the autobiographical example is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's...about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes. (p. 7)

It's my hope that these stories may be "capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction" (p. 7) by rendering notions of teacher-student relations and friendship as narrative for the building of novel and necessary theory.

Theorizing with Derrida & Friends

In what follows I theorize with a little help from my friends: poststructural thinkers who have taken up notions of friendship and related conceptual frames. I gather them all in one room, living and dead, across space and time, putting them into friendly conversationⁱⁱⁱ with two of my own anecdotal stories in order to consider what may and may not be possible to think with respect to friendship in education.

Derridean Friendship & Reciprocity

As noted above, the foundation for the Greco-Roman model of friendship was reciprocity: friendship constituted an exchange for the mutual benefit of both persons. Two friends each contribute to their common good, as in a conversation in which both learn from each other. Derrida (2005) understands modern friendship similarly:

The test of friendship remains...[that]...the friend must not only be good in himself, in a simple or absolute manner, he must be good for you, in relation to you who are his friend.
(p. 21)

And yet, Derrida would not be Derrida if he didn't rupture traditional Western thought. With respect to friendship, reciprocity is where he chooses to make that rupture. Derrida isn't particularly sanguine about the continuity of reciprocal friendship in the contemporary world because of the rupture of language ushered in by his work of deconstruction. The problem of the instability of language, which prompted the linguistic turn in philosophy, literary criticism and theory, engages the notion that "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 2016, p. 158), and thus that we must work with/in language despite its fundamental shortcomings.

If we assume that the basis of all friendship, the foundation that Derrida calls 'minimal friendship', lies in communication with and through language, then this rupture presents a crisis to friendship-as-reciprocity. Without "the reliability of the stable" (Derrida, 2005, p. 22) understanding of language, how can we understand friendship as a reciprocal exchange of language? What is left of friendship without that foundation? And what can we talk about with respect to a relationship given that nothing is outside text—ourselves, our friends, and our friendships included? The point, here, is not to be pessimistic about friendship, nor to suggest that friends aren't or shouldn't be reciprocal.

Rather, what I want to point to, with a story of my own, is a problem at the heart of reciprocal friendship, of the type that Derrida deconstructs, that I see at work in the teacher-student relationship. Again I remind that my focus in the following story will be on the risk that aspects of friendship (honesty, vulnerability, equality) pose to the relationship between teacher and student.

* * *

Off Campus

I returned to Indiana frustrated after a year teaching 11th grade American Lit. at a Catholic School in Brownsville, TX. That summer, my second full of M.Ed. coursework as part of my alternative certification program, had me taking courses in Differentiated Instruction, Assessment, and Secondary English methods, none of which seemed particularly helpful to me in the chaos of keeping my head above water as a beginning teacher. The methods course, at least, wasn't as stifling—not practical in ways that seemed helpful to me then, but more literary than the very measured and scientific vision of teaching pushed by my other courses. And I trusted the professor, Kevin, who seemed more sympathetic to the confusions of classrooms than other professors who seemed untroubled, who had it figured out.

So I met Kevin for a beer at one of the faux-Irish chain-pubs just off campus. This was a new experience for me—I had never drunk with a professor, or indeed, at 22, any professional person. We discussed my problems with teaching, with Brownsville, with feeling isolated from college friends working at banks in Manhattan or attending medical schools in Chicago. Kevin listened—there was nothing pedagogical going on, as far as I could tell. Rather than offering some professorly advice (“Hang in there” or “Everyone struggles during their first year” or “Have you read [some provincial academic you couldn't give a shit about]?”), Kevin told me about his own problems—how deeply unhappy he was working at a program he felt didn't support him as an intellectual, academic, and researcher, a program increasingly aligned with a brand of Right-wing politics which he saw himself as dedicated to working against. He told me he was on the market for a new position.

* * *

I wrote this story with friendship in mind. Importantly, I think “Off Campus” hinges—the point at which the thing pivots from a teacher-student anecdote into something I think of as friendship—on reciprocity. “Rather than offering some professorly advice...”, I wrote, “Kevin told me about his own problems.” There’s the exchange: the swapping of our mutual professional anxieties and dissatisfactions with a program philosophically and politically ill-suited to us. What’s more, I think I understood this as friendship because of the honesty I perceived in what Kevin told me. In sharing with me his dissatisfaction with the program we were both a part of, he rendered himself vulnerable, perhaps, to the information getting out and back to his supervisors. That risk gave the impression that I was talking to him not as a teacher but as a friend. There appears to be a tacit calculation: the vulnerability exposed by sharing honestly with me against the value of that commiseration to me as a friend. The latter compassion won out, it seems, suggesting that the primary concern here was for my sake—pedagogical friendship in the Noddings sense, then.

But this story also points, I think, to the impossibilities of reconciling friendship with teaching. It’s a story about Kevin’s desire to leave his position at the institution we were both a part of, the institution that positioned him as my teacher. It was only in sharing with me his desire to vacate his position that I felt the presence of friendship. This contradiction is not lost on Derrida—it’s at the heart of what he understands is going on with modern friendship, one beyond reciprocity. As he understands it, friendship is largely one-sided: “Friendship, what is that? It is to love before being loved^{iv}” (Derrida, 2005, p. 9). After taking the poststructural turn, we can no longer think of love or friendship as an essence or a form in itself but rather as performed: “One loves only by declaring that one loves” (p. 9). Friends are friends because they are named as such with language, another ordering of things (Foucault, 1994)—and with the deconstruction of language ushered in by Derrida and others, friendship, as a reciprocal act of naming in which meaning is carried across

language, may not be possible. Tracing this rupture in language through Nietzsche and Blanchot's thought, Derrida (1988) considers how those writers:

call the friend by a name that is no longer that of a neighbor, perhaps no longer that of a man...the 'who' of friendship now moves off into the distance beyond all these determinations; in its infinite immanence, it exceeds the interest of knowledge, science, truth, proximity, even life and even the memory of life. (p. 632)

Broadly, Derrida's thought is marked by the privileging of radical difference and singularity—making it difficult if not impossible to think friendship reciprocally, insofar as that necessarily depends on the un-dependability of language. In the story above, we can read this most immediately in my use of my teacher's name: linguistically, I mark him as 'Kevin', and not my professor, or with the salutations 'Dr.' or 'Mr.', or something else that would indicate that our relationship in the context of that conversation was primarily a professional one. The use of the first name de-formalizes, making the discourse look and sound like a conversation that might occur between friends—and conspicuously not that between a teacher or figure of authority and a student or subordinate^v.

Moving away from reciprocity entirely, Derrida (2005) understands friendship as not even necessarily desiring reciprocal exchange: "If a friend had to choose between knowing and being known, he would choose knowing rather than being known" (p. 11). Thus we're left now in a strange and contradictory place—what would it mean to be friends without friendship?

This is where the cryptic, probably apocryphal quote Derrida attributes to Aristotle (via Montaigne) comes in, which I take for my title: "O my friends, there is no friend" (p. 1). While I find myself thinking at length in this paper that friendship might be useful, it nevertheless may also be true, following Derrida, that my students and teachers are not my friends. Put differently, in calling them my friends I'm no longer calling them students or teachers. This isn't just about semantics—I read it as a negation with language of their respective educational positions. That is,

through a Derridean lens, only by declaring them friends do they become friends; and swimming as we all are in the Jenkinsian discourse that a teacher-student relationship is not a friendship, calling my student a friend negates their discursive status as my student. I'm now speaking to someone in a different position, in a different register, and there's a marked shift in what is and is not possible to say. It may be then that pedagogical friendship is only a "recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to them" (Derrida, 1988, p. 643).

Hopefully, Derrida leaves room for the future possibility of friendship:

Friendship is never given in the present. It belongs to the experience of waiting, of promise, or of commitment...that which responsibility opens to the future" (pp. 635-636)

(I am indeed good friends with Kevin and with many former teachers and students). Friendship, then, offers us "fucking human beings"^{vi} (Wallace, as cited in McCaffery, 1993, p. 4) a trajectory out of the dehumanizing work of the contemporary, particularly neoliberal educational moment, wherein standardization and accountability reforms, rampant testing, scripted curricula, etc. all problematize the complex, messy, human interactions between teachers and students. Recent pushes for the pedagogical use of digital technology (like MOOC's, which promise to "revolutionize" schools) seem *literally* bent on reducing and removing the human, relational components of the educational system, by, for example, upping the teacher-student ratio into the tens of thousands^{vii}. All of which pushes us toward a pedagogical model more predictable than one that depends on the mysteries of persons—and of course as in any neoliberal reform effort, a cheaper one. I mean "way out" quite literally, as this story demonstrates: in these times of profound disconnection (Mayo, 2017, p. 365), friendship may only be possible outside of the profession entirely.

Rancièrian Equality

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), Rancière sets out to demonstrate that a teacher has "nothing to teach" (p. 15), envisioning a pedagogy which assumes equality as a starting point for the

work of teaching rather than a goal to be achieved with students at the end of their education. An ignorant schoolmaster is one who does not presume to have knowledge or a curriculum to present students—who are themselves as much capable of deciding what counts as knowledge and the curriculum as the schoolmaster is. Rather, what the ignorant schoolmaster teaches students, if anything, are the ways students and teachers are educational equals and, importantly, what is made possible if they understand education as beginning from a place of equality. In this way, the ignorant schoolmaster “emancipates” rather than “teaches” students in the conventional sense: “he will not verify what the student has found; he will verify that the student has searched. He will judge whether or not he has paid attention” (p. 31).

Oriented this way, how can we think about the teacher-student relationship? Rancière’s approach is undeniably relational: as an initial example, he points to the 1833 tailors’ strike in Paris and their demand for “relations of equality” with their masters (pp. 47-48). Such relations “repudiat[e] the division between those who know and those who don’t, between those who possess or don’t possess the property of intelligence. (p. 71) Thus for educational relations to be equal, they have to reject the conventional teacher-student hierarchy, in which the expert teacher transmits knowledge via curriculum to students, a type of unequal relation Freire (2000) terms “the banking model.” Instead of the inequality of hierarchical relations, the Rancièrian (1991) model seeks as its end a community that “would know only minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone” (p. 71). Establishing and upholding relations of equality is about humanizing the persons in the midst of the educational enterprise, work on its way towards establishing a society of equals. But importantly, Rancière explains that in pursuit of such a society:

it is true that we don't know that men are equal. We are saying that they *might* be. This is our opinion, and we are trying, along with those who think as we do, to verify it. But we know this might is the very thing that makes a society of humans possible. (p. 73)

In other words, in assuming equality as a starting point for thinking education and relations between students and teachers, Rancièrian equality becomes a project of imagination, of exploring possibility as a way towards more human(e) classrooms.

Pedagogical relations of equality might be thought of as a form of friendship. We do not presume to know more about our friends than they themselves do; we are in that very particular Rancièrian sense “ignorant.” We may offer friendly advice, but we do so usually from a relatively humble position of equality, in keeping with Noddings’ understanding that friends do what’s best for their friends’ sake while also respecting each other’s autonomy. On this point, Derrida (2005) agrees: “friendship demands an equality of virtue between friends” (p. 23). Indeed, in demonstrating what it takes to be an ignorant schoolmaster—namely, to ask students what they know, in order to begin their search for knowledge—Ranciè (1991) invokes friendship as a different way of talking to a child: “to verify the young student’s knowledge, you need not hesitate to perform this inquiry, even though you have had no schooling. “‘What are you learning, my little friend?’ you will ask the child.” (p. 33) It seems friendship, dependent on an equality of the relation, is well-suited as a relational mode for building those relations pedagogically.

We can overlay this framework relatively easily onto the story above to see ways my relationship with Kevin evidences aspects of Rancièrian equality. As noted above, my use of his first name acts as a linguistic marker of equality, recalling the way friends address each other. But my characterization of Kevin also demonstrates a pedagogical ignorance of the type Ranciè understands as foundational to educational equality. I note I “trusted” Kevin because he “seemed more sympathetic to the confusions of classrooms than my other professors...who had it all figured

out.”—he expressed what Rancière would understand as an ignorant stance in his capacity as my teacher. Later, the story pivots on his “refusal to offer professorly advice” and my observation that “there was nothing pedagogical going on.” I felt that there was nothing for Kevin to teach me, and that nothing was being taught in that moment. Instead, we drank and shared our frustrations, commiserating as friends often do but not, as I make clear I felt in the story, as teachers and students do. We sat together as frustrated equals.

One way to think about why the moment felt like a friendship among equals has to do with that absence of pedagogy: I didn’t feel like my concerns were being instrumentalized towards whatever Kevin, as my professor, felt he should teach me; I was a person with an equal right to believe what I wanted to. As Derrida (2005) notes, friendships, like Rancièrian equality are non-instrumental: “Why are the mean, the malevolent, the ill-intentioned not, by definition, good friends? Because they prefer things to friends.” (p. 19). That is, in this story I do not understand myself positioned as a student, a thing to be taught, but instead as a friend. Yet my reading here suggests that, if the non-instrumental equality of friendship has to do with the absence of pedagogy, then pedagogy may be inherently instrumental, always already an imposition on students, and thus teacher-student friendship of the non-instrumental, non-impositional kind (which is to say, a friendship among equals) may be impossible. Indeed, I agree with Segall (2002) that:

Even good and democratic teachers...impose their views. Such an imposition is inevitable; it derives from the very act of teaching, of making choices among a variety of possible learning opportunities for one’s students; choices that advance some knowledge, knowing, and knowers over others. (p. 98)

I’m skeptical then that something like friendship could happen between students and teachers given this understanding of teaching—even the most well-intentioned, equality-focused teaching—as always an unequal imposition. As a teacher-educator, for example, I attempt to counter this unequal

relation by espousing student-centered approaches to teaching that primatize students' own meaning-making capabilities in their learning. This is nevertheless an imposition of my own view: that student-centered teaching often makes for more meaningful and ethical learning than the alternatives. This is also, it should be noted, its own form of relational inequality, in that it privileges the student over the teacher. Any teacher who has attempted this type of pedagogy has likely encountered student resistance to it; it's always curious how students often respond to "liberatory" student-centered lessons with protests that they're "not actually being taught anything," expressing the desire to go back to a mode where the teacher lectures, they as students take notes, and they're tested at the end of it all. Which is to say they want their education to resemble "school" as they've experienced it in their pasts, by and large, and have to come to understand how it has been and should be. This view need not necessarily be incompatible with Rancière, though, whose pedagogy doesn't focus on achieving equality through imposition but rather assumes equality as a starting point. The latter may make friendship, which in my view requires an assumption of equality, possible, but I don't think I would call it teaching: indeed, "Off Campus" is a story about establishing a friendship with a teacher who is no longer my teacher.

Foucault & the Beautiful Risk of Friendship

In addition to a move towards equality, pedagogical friendship also entails risk—in "Off Campus", Kevin shared information with me that may have put his job as my teacher in jeopardy. Regardless of how serious the risk was, I read it at the time as a real one—and in risking that, I felt honesty, I felt that I was talking with a friend. In this final section I turn to Foucault, whose theorizing helps us frame the (im)possibilities of educational friendship through the lens of risk. Derrida (2000), too, understands friendship as a risk, as requiring a test it might fail: "There is no friend without time—that is, without that which puts confidence to the test. (p. 15) Foucault himself was interested in the risk of what he calls "fearless speech", or parrhesia. For Foucault (2008),

parrhesia “consists in telling the truth without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it” (p. 10). But, crucially, “for there to be parrhesia...the subject must be taking some kind of risk in speaking” (p. 11). That is, the truth of a statement is dependent on what’s risked in telling in it. Thus we might understand parrhesia as a form of virtue, as “involv[ing] some form of courage...which consists in the parrhesiast taking the risk” (p. 11) As one recent example, I think we can see parrhesia in the Never-Trump movement (e.g., Stephens, 2017) among republicans who refused to accept the nomination of Donald Trump as the G.O.P. candidate in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, despite the clear political risks of doing so^{viii}. Or, in the literary realm, the protagonist of Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, John Proctor, plays the part of the parrhesiast when he renounces his false confession, condemning himself to death for telling the truth. The point is that across these examples truth depends on the extent to which its telling constitutes a risk to the teller. In what follows, I share a narrative of a moment in my relationship with one of my former students which helps us see how the risk of parrhesia is tied inextricably to opening up the possibility of aspects of friendship—what, building on Biesta (2013), I call “the beautiful risk of friendship”.

* * *

The Closed Door

“Take risks,” I tell them. “The point of this speech is to inspire.” Towards the end of my semester teaching Speech & Multimedia to 9th graders at a Catholic high school in Chicago, I told students to give a speech that would inspire their peers. They’d already entertained, informed, and persuaded; now the course culminated in a very different kind of speech: personal in ways the others hadn’t been, creative, risky, requiring vulnerability.

But, being a teacher, I had to cover my ass. I asked students to email me their ideas so I could give them a once-over: no drugs, no drinking, I hoped. No politics.

That night I received an email from one of my quieter students, Gabrielle^{ix}. Gabby wanted to give a speech about coming out in 8th grade, about the bullying she'd endured at the hands of Catholic school peers who felt theologically and culturally sanctioned by the community to treat homosexuality with mockery and contempt. Gabby wanted to give this speech at her new Catholic high school, in the fall of her first semester. I worried. I asked to meet with her the following day.

We arranged to meet in the annex of the English office, where English teachers usually took their lunches. Though it shared a wall with the teachers' offices (14 desks), it was a private space I felt appropriate given the sensitive nature of the conversation—Gabby wasn't openly "out" yet in that school community. We met for ten minutes, during which time I shared my worries. I told her I admired her courage and that I'm sure it would be inspiring, but I also wanted she thought through how this might be received by her peers, lest she be bullied again. I told her I couldn't tell what to, but I wanted to make sure she'd thought it through. She had.

The next day she gave the speech—it was fantastic. She inspired; her peers cried; I was moved by the compassion showed by everyone. Couldn't have gone better.

Later that afternoon, I sat at my desk in the English office. A tap on my shoulder. Our department chair, Samantha: "Did you meet with a female student in the annex yesterday? With the door closed?"

I knew immediately what she was asking about. Flustered, embarrassed, I explained what the conversation was about and why I had held the meeting in the annex. I had been told many times, as a young high school teacher, not to meet behind closed doors with any student. I had forgotten, preoccupied with concern for Gabby and the private nature of the conversation. Samantha understood: "It's not a big deal."

I turned back to my desk and resumed work, futilely. I remembered, then, that my conversation in the annex with Gabby had been interrupted by another English colleague who had come in to get her lunch.

* * *

Risk can be read across "The Closed Door." When I expressed that I hoped students' speeches would include "no drugs, no drinking...no politics," I revealed feelings of vulnerability,

that in encouraging students to take risks in their speeches, I became aware that teaching in this way is “a weak, open, and risky process ... only made possible by taking the radical openness and unpredictability of all communication seriously” (Biesta, 2013, p. 41). If a student spoken about drugs, drinking, or politics, I felt it would’ve rendered me vulnerable because those subjects are often deemed taboo in the context of a high school class. I worried, of course, about my job (what if someone found out? A parent complained?). This was a risk, sure, but looking back now it doesn’t seem much of one.

Rather, I’m interested in my choice to talk to Gabrielle privately. I did so out of concern for her sake, as a friend perhaps, that she not be outed in a potentially hostile environment. But this choice led directly to the conversation with Samantha at the end, which, while not disciplinary, was fraught, I felt, with the insinuation of something sinister—the specter of a teacher-student sex scandal, of a male teacher alone with a female student behind a closed door. All the more unnerving for me was the revelation that a colleague had interrupted my conversation with Gabrielle and went directly to my department chair to report what she’d seen. It was only after talking with Samantha that I realized the risk I’d taken (“embarrassed, flustered”), which makes me not such an exemplary parrhesiast, who must know the risk ahead of time and take it anyway. Still, the story points to the way my attempt at counseling Gabrielle as a human being, treating her as my friend, was read scandalously and rendered suspect as a result.

In his analysis of parrhesia, Foucault draws from Plutarch’s (2008) treatise on flattery and friendship, “which is entirely taken up with...the two opposed, conflicting practices of flattery, on the one hand, and parrhesia...on the other.” (p. 7)—that is, Foucault equates parrhesia with acting as a friend. Later, he notes that parrhesia “can only exist if there is friendship” (p. 11) “The Closed Door” evidences the ways in which truth-telling in a pedagogical relationship—of the kind of a friend offering honest advice out of concern for their friend’s sake—constituted a risk for me as a

teacher. In taking this risk, I opened myself up to accusations of impropriety, but I may have provided the kind of friendly advice Gabrielle needed to go through with the speech. I feel I'm treading in dangerous water here, downplaying the importance of allegations in this time when so many men stand accused of sexual misconduct and brush it off as "mere allegation." That's not something I want to do. The challenge of this is trying to take the risk of friendship seriously for what it offers while also keeping in mind that there are real dangers: not just to teachers who might lose their jobs but also to students who could become victims. That danger and the fear of it is real and may be justified, but I still think friendship offers a different way to think about what's possible between students and teachers in ways that might humanize rather than harm.

Tentatively, I suggest that friendship as theorized here may not be possible without risk; in the same way that fearless speech isn't possible without a real sense of fear—we can't know whether or not that speech was fearless unless there is a risk involved. For Foucault, true speech can only ever be fearless; that is, it can only ever be said (and heard) within a context that makes its telling risky, that threatens the teller. Similarly, I argue that aspects of friendship that may be worthwhile—honesty, compassion, humanity—may never breach the surface of daily student-teacher relations without an occasion of real vulnerability. That is, conditions that render students and teachers vulnerable, that introduce risks, may be necessary for the emergence of teacher-student friendship—risks all the more beautiful for the humanizing possibilities they offer in these increasingly dehumanizing times.

For Biesta (2013): "Education always involves a risk...the risk is there because, as W.B. Yeats puts it, education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire...not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings" (p. 1). Yet risk is a problem for much of contemporary education research and policy, which seeks best-practices and some certainty about "what works" and what doesn't in classrooms. The fear of risk too pervades much corporate

education reform, which is necessarily risk-averse, with its neoliberal logic, as markets are. But this is, as Biesta argues and I hope this paper suggests, a mistake. The mistake is seeing the weakness of education—its risk, “the fact that there will never be a perfect match between ‘input’ and ‘output’—only as a defect...and not also as the very condition that makes education possible” (p. 4). Risk provides the possibility for education as a practice of freedom. “Without the risk, education itself disappears and social reproduction, insertion into existing ways of being, doing, and thinking, takes over.” (p. 140) This is what Biesta understands as “the beautiful risk of education”, and this is what I read as the potential of friendship in both stories—moments of rupture of and against social reproduction into existing ways of being student and teacher.

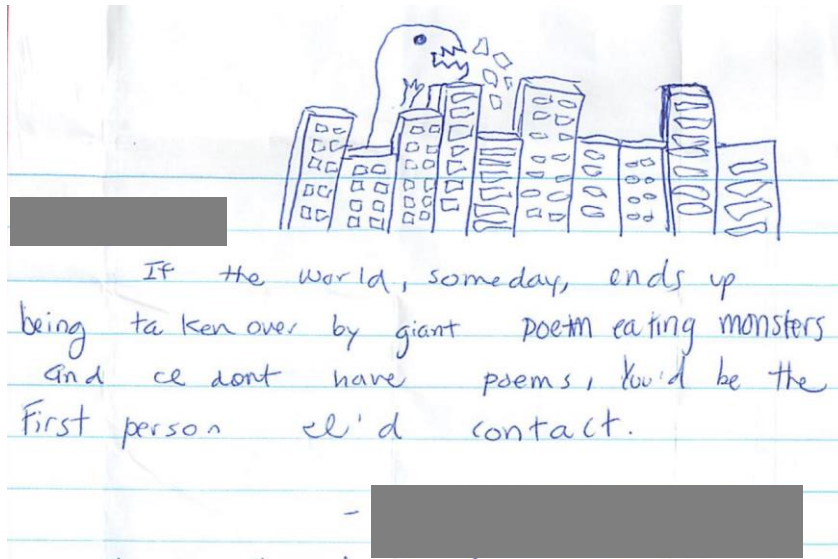
Conclusions, Possibilities: A Faith that Opens the Experience of Time

One way to draw these strings together in closing is to say that enacting friendship in education is difficult, if not impossible: what these stories have evidenced, in light of the theory I’ve drawn upon, is that pursuing a more humane teacher-student relationship also constitutes significant risks to all involved. Understandably, teachers may not be willing to take these risks, which hold the potential for very real professional and personal repercussions. Yet I persist in believing, a faith without faith, a faith that opens the experience of time (Derrida, 2005, p. 15), that:

If one names and cites the best friends, those who illustrated true and perfect friendship, it is because this friend comes to illuminate. It illustrates itself, makes happy or successful things shine, gives them visibility, renders them more resplendent. (p. 3)

Perhaps we can end, then, by thinking about what else we might mean by “friends” that might illuminate the teacher-student relationship, rendering education more resplendent. Whatever this other concept is, my hope is that it can enrich the relational work of teaching.

Maybe not friends then. Perhaps an emergency contact in the absence of poetry, as my former student Sofia suggests:



Who acknowledges the absences at the heart of contemporary education, absences which only heighten the longing for richer relationships in schools and beyond them. “In the absence of sparrows”, writes the poet Daniel Johnson, “a crowd of friends and family gather.” It might be that thinking about friendship makes it possible to ask and answer the question, in renewed ways, “Can education create new ways of doing things that balance educational considerations with ethical ones?” (Burke & Greteman, 2013, p. 165). Teachers doing such relational work will need to risk accusations of impropriety, of insufficient rigor, of unwarranted risk, of impossibility. They’ll need to risk entering into sincere communication with the human beings that are their students. In what follows I detail implications of these findings for teaching, teacher education, and research.

Teaching

This essay evidences the importance of attending to the complicated relationships between teachers and their students. What I believe I’ve contributed differently to that work is the specific intervention friendship offers to the relationship between teachers and students: a beautiful risk. My exploration into friendship reveals in particular the value of what’s possible through risking the relational norm, the agreed-upon relationship between teachers and students: it offers through the honesty of parrhesia (Foucault, 2008) momentary possibilities (Derrida, 2005) for a more human(e)

education, one approaching relations of equality (Rancière, 1991). But, at the same time, this essay points to how such friendship may nevertheless not be realistically possible for teachers who want to keep their jobs, rendered vulnerable by an entrenched discourse for how they should relate with students. I never said there wouldn't be a risk. Still, there is clearly a much-needed space for renewed consideration of the potentiality of educational relationships—and friendship may just help in this regard—in light of these dehumanizing times, which seem so bent on making teaching and learning a mechanistic, predictable, profoundly un-relational and inhuman(e) enterprise.

Teacher Education

Certainly this relational work needs to occur in schools, but I think it might also be fruitfully developed in the teacher education classroom. What's especially useful about that space is that it asks preservice-teachers to span both positions of the pedagogical relationship: they are students in their teacher-preparation courses, but they also try on the mantles of teacher for the first time in student-teaching roles and microteaching lessons. They are consequently well-positioned to experiment with the relationship between those two positions, I think, considering it otherwise, as they already understand each role as a relatively fluid position they can move in and out of as needed. Perhaps we might think of friendship that way: not as something to be asserted firmly, what Biesta (2013) calls a “strong” approach to education, but something taken up as needed, depending on the lesson, the day, or the particular human beings we encounter. Such relational flexibility would be crucially useful to pre-service teachers as they begin to negotiate the “possible lives” (Rose, 1999) they might live in the profession.

Research

We might also consider friendship as a way of framing the researcher-subject relationship. As any researcher knows, friendships emerge during the course of conducting a study, as “relationships with people are created, as conversations among those people are exchanged, and as

interactions rooted in difference, conflict, vulnerabilities, and respect are forged.” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. 28). Yet such friendships might present problems as researchers come to make decisions about what to write, who to credit, and how to represent those studied. As Paris and Winn (2014) make abundantly clear, the choices researchers make can have violently dehumanizing consequences if they aren’t made in conjunction with those studied in ways that benefit all involved. Friendship seems an invaluable frame, then, for how we might think the researcher-subject relationship differently in ways that foreground that relationship to the mutual benefit of both parties. What I’ve offered here can be understood as a part of the urgent and complicated work of how to humanize the work of inquiry and the people caught up in it.

By way of closing, I turn to Naomi Shihab Nye’s (1987) poem “Rain”, which centers around the relational aspects of pedagogy. A student shares the one thing he remembers from 3rd grade—that someone “tutched” him on the shoulder—and how it came to matter immensely and improbably in his life. His teacher doesn’t see the value of this, and instead judges her work a failure because of the trivial nature of his response and mistakes in his spelling. And yet what the student wrote contains an imagined refuge for him, a world he wants to “go inside and live” though he can’t; one he can nevertheless imagine as a result of the relational act. What I’ve tried to do here is imagine a relational world worth inhabiting for students and teachers, one built on the honesty and compassion and resplendence of the best friendships, even as the stories I’ve told suggest the risks and impossibilities of realizing those friendships in schools.

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Word Count: 9,214

ⁱ ¹ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Defining-the-Relationship/237388>

ⁱⁱ ² Hey, these are his words, not mine. But I think they're promising, if enigmatic, for what they open up in thinking friendship in education—so bear with it, if you will.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cicero: "Friends are together when they are separated, they are rich when they are poor, strong when they are weak, and – a thing even harder to explain – they live on after they have died." (1971, p. 56, as cited in Derrida, 2005, p. 5)

^{iv} I jump between friendship and love here in a manner that might seem confusing, especially if you're familiar with Burke & Greteman's (2013) recovery of liking in pedagogical friendship as a way of resisting problematic discourses around love in education. Nevertheless, I use 'love' here in conjunction with friendship because Derrida does it (though his usage is still quite confusing—this is an unfortunate side effect of reading Derrida). For the sake of our collective understanding, think of 'to love' here as the verb form of friendship—to treat a person as a friend.

^v This all may seem an awful lot to put on names, but I'm of the mind that they matter a great deal, in that "there's something to be said about the power of naming in the creation of reality." (Burke & DeLeon, 2015, p. 18). And at any rate, it is Derrida's own focus on names that led my reading here.

^{vi} I note here Wallace's question:

What's engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price? And can these capacities thrive? And if so, how, and if not why not? (McCaffery, 1993, p. 4)

He's of course speaking about creative writing, but I think the aims are nonetheless the same—what happens to the persons and the relationships between persons caught up in contemporary education reforms? And what might friendship do to make space for the thriving of capacities for joy, charity, and genuine relational connection?

^{vii} "My friends, if you want to have friends, do not have too many." (Derrida, 2005, p. 22)

^{viii} An imperfect example, to be sure, but the point is that it's one thing to see Joe Biden or Nancy Pelosi or other democrats vilify Trump; it's another entirely to see members of his own party do so.

^{ix} All names in this second story are pseudonyms.