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Witnessing Deconstruction in Education: Why Quasi-Transcendentalism Matters

GERT BIESTA

‘Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one.’
(Derrida, 1991, p. 273)

INTRODUCTION: THE END(S) OF DECONSTRUCTION

If 1967 was the year when Jacques Derrida burst onto the philosophical scene with the publication of three texts that became important reference points for late 20th century philosophy – *De la grammatologie (Of Grammatology)*, *L'écriture et la différence (Writing and Difference)* and *La voix et le phénomène (Speech and Phenomena)* (Derrida 1967a; 1976; 1967b; 1978; 1967c; 1973) – 1997, when Woody Allen released his film *Deconstructing Harry*, was perhaps the year when the word that made Derrida famous became firmly established in popular culture and, through this, in everyday language. Indeed, nowadays many seem to use the word ‘deconstruction’ as little more than a synonym for critical analysis,¹ without being aware of the very specific meaning the word has in Derrida’s work. The Oxford English Dictionary is no exception to this as it defines ‘deconstruction’ as a ‘strategy of critical analysis associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida ... directed towards exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophical and literary language.’

Although Derrida has questioned the very possibility of defining what deconstruction is – claiming that ‘all sentences of the type ‘Deconstruction is X’ or ‘Deconstruction is not X’ *a priori* miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false’ (Derrida, 1991, p. 275, emphasis in original) – my problem with the depiction of deconstruction as a form of critical analysis is not so much that it tries to pin things down.² It is rather that equating deconstruction with critical analysis misses one of the main points of Derrida’s work, *viz.*, his questioning of the traditional philosophical gesture in which the philosopher positions himself on some safe ground outside of the scene of analysis. As Derrida has put it in an interview with Richard Kearney, one of the main questions that has motivated his writing has precisely been ‘from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) philosophy [can] as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner’ (Derrida, 1984, p. 108). This is why we can’t simply depict deconstruction as a form of critique because ‘the instance of *krinein* or of *krisis* (decision, choice, judgement, discernment) is *itself* ... one of the essential ‘themes’ or ‘objects’ of deconstruction’ (Derrida, 1991, p. 273, emphasis added). Deconstruction always aims ‘at the trust confided in the critical, critico-theoretical agency, that

is, the deciding agency', which means that in this regard 'deconstruction is deconstruction of critical dogmatism' (Derrida, 1995, p. 54; see also Biesta & Stams, 2000).

Starting, then, from Derrida's statement that deconstruction 'is not a method and cannot be transformed into one' (Derrida, 1991, p. 273) – which may be bad news for all the 'deconstructionists' and aspiring 'deconstructionists' out there – I will try to argue in this paper that the 'end' of deconstructionism as a method or technique is actually good news as it paves the way for a different relationship with deconstruction. Following Geoffrey Bennington's suggestion I will refer to this relationship as *witnessing* and, more specifically, as witnessing metaphysics-in-deconstruction (Bennington, 2000, p. 11). Witnessing metaphysics-in-deconstruction not only hints at a set of activities that is different from 'critical analysis' but also suggests a different attitude, one that is affirmative more than destructive and that is ethico-political more than that it operates on the plane of cognition and rationality.³ In what follows I will try not only to indicate what it might entail to witness deconstruction in education and education-in-deconstruction, but also to make clear how and why this matters educationally. In the final section of this paper I will turn to the question of philosophy of education, not only to articulate more explicitly how philosophy of education might be 'done' if it wishes to take inspiration from Derrida's writing, but also to hint at some reasons why philosophy of education may also need to be 'undone' a little. Let me begin, though, with some words about deconstruction.

METAPHYSICS-IN-DECONSTRUCTION: A WITNESS REPORT

One way to start reading Derrida is through his critique of metaphysics – bearing in mind that the meaning of 'critique' will be displaced in the attempt. Derrida has argued that the history of Western philosophy can be read as a continuous attempt to locate a fundamental ground, a fixed centre, an Archimedean point, which serves both as an absolute beginning and as a centre from which everything originating can be mastered and controlled (see Derrida, 1978, p. 279). He has suggested that ever since Plato this origin has been defined in terms of *presence*, that is, as an origin that is self-sufficient and fully present to itself; an origin that simply 'exists.' For Derrida the 'determination of Being as *presence*' is the very matrix of the history of metaphysics, a history which coincides with the history of the West in general (see Derrida, 1978, p. 279). This is why he has argued that it could be shown 'that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence' (ibid.). Here we should not only think of such apparent fundamentals as 'God' or 'nature'. For Derrida *any* attempt to present something as original, fundamental and self-sufficient – and for Derrida such origins include both 'consciousness' (for example, in Kant or Hegel) and 'communication' (for example, in pragmatism or Habermas) – is an example of what he refers to as the *metaphysics of presence* (see Derrida, 1978, p. 281). The metaphysics of presence includes more than just the determination of the meaning of being as presence. It also entails a *hierarchical axiology* in which the origin itself is designated as pure, simple, normal, standard, self-sufficient and self-identical, so that everything that follows from it can only be understood in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, and so on.

Why is the metaphysics of presence a problem? This is actually quite a difficult question to answer and in a sense Derrida's whole oeuvre can be seen as a series of attempts to develop an answer this question *and* – and the 'and' is very important here – to reflect on how and from where an answer can be given. One line in Derrida's writing centres on the observation that presence always requires the 'help' of something that is not present, i.e., something that is absent. What is 'present' is therefore constituted 'by means of [the] very relation to what it is not' (Derrida, 1982, p. 13). 'Good', for example, only has meaning because it is different from 'evil'. One might argue that 'good' is originary and that 'evil' is secondary and has to be understood as a lapse or fall, as the absence of good – and there are

powerful narratives in Western culture which indeed follow this pattern. But as soon as we try to define 'good' without any recourse whatsoever to a notion of evil, it becomes clear that the presence of 'good' is only possible because of its relationship to what is not good, *viz.*, 'evil' (for this example see Lucy, 2004, p. 102). This shows that 'good' does not exclude 'evil' but is necessarily contaminated by it. Stated in more general terms, it reveals that the 'otherness' that is excluded to maintain the myth of a pure and uncontaminated original presence is actually constitutive of that which presents itself as such (see also Bennington, 1993, pp. 217-8). We could say, therefore, that the 'thing' that makes 'good' possible (i.e., 'evil') is the very 'thing' that also undermines it and makes it impossible. Or in more philosophical terms: that the condition of possibility of 'good' is at the same time a condition of *impossibility*. It is this strange – or in more technical terms: quasi-transcendental – 'logic' to which Derrida sometimes refers as 'deconstruction.' Whereas transcendental philosophy aims to articulate conditions of possibility and leave things there, deconstruction concerns the 'oscillation,' the necessary *and* impossible combination of conditions of possibility and conditions of impossibility (see also Caputo, 1997).

Looking at it this way shows that deconstruction is not the activity of revealing the impossibility of metaphysics (see also below). It also shows that deconstruction is not something that Derrida does or that other philosophers can do after him. Deconstruction is rather something that 'occurs.' Or in Derrida's own words:

'[D]econstructions,' which I prefer to say in the plural ... is one of the possible names to designate ... what occurs [*ce qui arrive*], or cannot manage to occur [*ce qui n'arrive pas à arriver*], namely a certain dislocation, which in effect reiterates itself regularly – and wherever there is something rather than nothing (Derrida and Ewald, 2001, p. 67).

This not only helps to explain why deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one. It also shows that, in a sense, all deconstruction is 'auto-deconstruction' (see Derrida, 1997, p. 9) – deconstruction 'occurs,' whether we want it or not. But that doesn't mean that there is nothing to do in relation to deconstruction. While it's not up to us to let deconstruction happen or prevent it from happening, what we can do – and what Derrida has done many times in his writings, for example, in relation to notions like presence, meaning, the gift, democracy, friendship and justice – is to show, to reveal, or, as Bennington (2000, p. 11) has suggested, to *witness* the occurrence of deconstruction or, to be more precise, to witness *metaphysics-in-deconstruction*. Witnessing the occurrence of deconstruction means to bear witness to events of which the condition of possibility is at the very same time the condition of impossibility.

Why would it be important to witness metaphysics-in-deconstruction? The most straightforward answer to this question is that we should do this in order to bear witness to what is made *invisible* by a particular presence but is nonetheless necessary to make this presence possible. It is to do justice to what is excluded by what is present. It is to do justice to the 'other' of presence (see Biesta 2001) – which is one reason why Derrida has claimed that 'deconstruction *is* justice' (Derrida, 1992, p. 35; see also Biesta, 2003). This already suggests that the point of deconstruction is not negative or destructive but first and foremost *affirmative* (see Derrida, 1997, p. 5). It is an affirmation of what is excluded and forgotten; an affirmation of what is *other* (see also Gasché, 1994). Another way of putting this is to say that deconstruction wants to open up the metaphysics of presence – or, for that matter any system – in the name of what cannot be thought of in terms of the system and yet makes the system possible. This means, however, that the point of deconstruction is not simply to affirm what is known to be excluded by the system. What is at stake in witnessing metaphysics-in-deconstruction is an affirmation of what is wholly other, of what is unforeseeable from the present. It is, as Derrida puts it, an affirmation of an otherness that is always to come, as an event which 'as event, exceeds

calculation, rules, programs, anticipations' (Derrida, 1992, p. 27). In this sense it is not simply an affirmation of who or what is other, but rather of the *otherness* of who or what is other. Deconstruction is an opening and an openness towards an *unforeseeable* in-coming (*l'invention*; invention) of the other, which is why Caputo has suggested that we might characterise deconstruction as a form of 'inventionalism' (see Caputo, 1997, p. 42). In some places Derrida refers to this as 'the impossible'. For Derrida 'the impossible' is not what is *impossible* but what cannot be foreseen as a possibility (see also Biesta, 2001).

It is important to see that all this does *not* amount to an attempt to overcome, to do away with or to destroy metaphysics. Whereas Derrida wants to put the metaphysical 'gesture' of Western philosophy into question, he states that his approach is different from Nietzsche's 'demolition' of metaphysics or Heidegger's 'destruction' (*Destruktion* or *Abbau*) (see Derrida, 1991, pp. 270-1). Nietzsche, Heidegger, and all the other 'destructive discourses' in Western thought wanted to make a total break with the metaphysical tradition. They wanted to end and to overcome metaphysics. Derrida believes, however that such a total rupture is not a real possibility because if we were to leave metaphysics behind, we would have nothing to stand on and no tool to work with.

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We ... can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest (Derrida, 1978, p. 280).

While Derrida wants to 'shake' metaphysics, he acknowledges that this cannot be done from some neutral and innocent place 'outside' of metaphysics. He acknowledges that we cannot step outside of the tradition, since that would leave us without any tools, without even a language to investigate, criticise and 'shake' metaphysics – it would even leave us without a place to stand. What is more to the point, therefore, is to say – in simple words – that Derrida wants to shake metaphysics by showing that it is itself always already 'shaking', by showing, in other words, the impossibility of any of its attempts to fix or immobilise being through the presentation of a self-sufficient, self-identical presence. This is what witnessing metaphysics-in-deconstruction is about. The act of witnessing can, however, only be performed from the 'inside' – or at least *not* from some kind of neutral, uncontaminated position outside of the system. In this respect Derrida clearly rejects the traditional philosophical 'position' of the philosopher as the outside-spectator, the one who oversees the universe without being part of it. This is precisely why Derrida has identified the question as to 'from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) philosophy [can] as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner' (Derrida, 1984, p. 108) as central for his 'project.'

DECONSTRUCTION IN EDUCATION – EDUCATION-IN-DECONSTRUCTION

Are there signs of deconstruction occurring in education and of education-in-deconstruction? And if there are, why would it matter to bear witness to such signs? Let me begin with the first question and relate this to some of my own writings on education.

One theme I have pursued through a number of publications is that of the role of communication in educational processes and practices. The question I have asked in relation to this is how education is possible (see, for example, Vanderstraeten and Biesta, 2001; 2006; see also Biesta, 2004; Osberg and Biesta, 2008; Osberg, Biesta and Cilliers, 2008). In one respect the answer to this question is simple in that we can say that education is made possible through communication – most notably the communication between teachers and students, although it can be argued that textbooks, curricula and school buildings, to name but a few educational artefacts, also try to communicate something to students. A common way

to theorise communication is through the so-called sender-receiver model. Here communication is conceived as the transmission of information from one place (the sender) to another place (the receiver) through a medium or channel. It includes processes of encoding on the side of the sender in order to put the information in such a form that it can go through the medium or channel. It involves processes of decoding on the side of the receiver in order to transform the encoded information back into its original state.

While the sender-receiver model might be an adequate way to describe the transportation of bits of information from one location to another – it's very useful, for example, to describe how information from a television camera ends up on the television screen at home – I have argued that it is an inadequate model for understanding human communication. The main reason for this is that human communication is not about the transportation of *information* but about the exchange of *meaning*. In the sender-receiver model 'decoding' is seen as just a technical matter: that of taking away the 'packaging' that was needed to send the information safely from one location such as the TV studio to another location such as the home. What is omitted in this account, however, is not only what is happening in front of the camera but also, and more importantly, the fact that for the meaning of what is happening in front of the camera to 'arrive' at the other end, someone actually needs to watch the screen and make sense of what is being seen. What we find at the 'end' of human communication, therefore, are processes of interpretation and sense-making rather than simple unpacking and retrieving.

This reveals that there is a fundamental flaw in the sender-receiver model, at least if it is being used as a model to understand human communication, as it is based on the assumption that the meaning of information is attached to the medium that carries the information, i.e., that the meaning of a book is in the book, that the meaning of a lecture is in the words spoken, that the meaning of a curriculum is in the curriculum, and so on – so that identity of meaning between sender and receiver is just a technical matter, just an issue of *transportation*. As soon as it is acknowledged, however, that meaning is *not* something that we passively receive but that we actively (though not necessarily always consciously) ascribe – we give meaning *to*, we make sense *of* – it becomes clear that the sender-receiver model omits the most crucial part of human communication, *viz.*, that of the interpretation of the 'message' (which then ceases to be just a message) on the side of the 'receiver' (who then ceases to be just a receiver).

If we look at educational communication from this angle we can already begin to see that what makes such communication possible – interpretation – at the very same time threatens to make communication impossible. The reason for this is that the interpretations on the side of the 'receiver' *are* never completely determined by the intentions of the 'sender' and also *can* never be completely determined by the intentions of the 'sender' for the very reason that even if the 'sender' were to articulate his or her intentions explicitly, these would always need to be interpreted by the 'receiver' as well.⁴ Educational communication – but for that matter any form of human communication – is therefore not a matter of give and take, but more a matter of give and mis-take. It is here that we can begin to see deconstruction occurring in education in that the condition of possibility of educational communication appears to be at the very same time its condition of *impossibility*. This is not to suggest that educational communication is *not* possible; what it rather highlights is *how* educational communication is possible, *viz.*, on the basis of a strange, deconstructive 'logic'.

If this is so, why, then, might it be important to highlight the occurrence of deconstruction in education? Why might it be important to witness the event of education-in-deconstruction? Let me now turn to this question.

OPENINGS, CLOSURES, AND IN(TER)VENTIONS

The deconstructive nature of educational communication suggests that there is a certain ‘slippage’ in the processes of education, that there is an imperfection or weakness, so we might say, a certain ‘opening’ which occurs each time we engage in education. From one angle this is pretty irritating. If we want to teach our students that 2 and 2 makes 4, if we want them to learn how to drive a car, how to weld, how to administer anaesthesia, if we want them to understand how the convention of the rights of the child came into existence, what racism is and why it is wrong, what democracy is and why it is good, what evolution theory and creationism are about, or why deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one, our aim is to get it ‘right’ and, more importantly, our aim is for our students to get it ‘right.’⁵ Teachers have a special ‘trick’ for getting it right. It is not called effective teaching but *assessment* (see Biesta, 2008). Assessment is the mechanism that constantly tries to close the gap between teaching and learning. It does this by saying ‘this is right’ and ‘this is wrong’ – and, more often, by saying ‘you are right’ and ‘you are wrong.’ In a sense it is as simple as that. But because the slippage is there all the time, achieving closure in education requires an enormous amount of effort. Looking at the financial and human resources societies put into this ‘project,’ one can begin to get a sense of the force of this little opening that occurs ‘wherever there is something rather than nothing’ (Derrida and Ewald, 2001, p. 67).⁶ Of course, societies invest in this project because they believe that they have it right and because they believe that it is important for the next generation to get it right as well – which is precisely where Dewey started his discussion of education in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1966).

To witness deconstruction in education is thus first of all helpful in order to understand why education as a ‘project’ requires so much effort. But the point of witnessing deconstruction is not about identifying its occurrence in order then to effectively tame it. There is, as I have shown, something more at stake, which is the fact that this little opening called ‘deconstruction’ can also be an entrance for the in-coming of something unforeseen. Derrida connects these points very helpfully in a discussion of J. L. Austin’s speech act theory (see Derrida, 1988). Austin is concerned with the question how performative speech acts – speech acts that try to ‘do’ something rather than that they are intended to convey meaning – can work successfully. Austin acknowledges that performative speech acts always run the risk of failure. Austin, however, sees such failures as accidents, as events that occur outside of ‘normal’ human interaction. This is why he puts a lot of effort in specifying the conditions under which performative speech acts can work – conditions, so we might say, that must be met before we can engage successfully in performative speech acts (see Derrida, 1988, pp. 14-5). Derrida, on the other hand, suggests that if the potential failure of performative speech acts is *always* a possibility then we should perhaps see this ‘necessary possibility’ of failure as constitutive of rather than as the exception of performative speech acts. Derrida takes up this issue in the context of a wider discussion about the conditions of possibility of communication more generally, particularly in relation to the question of the ‘context’ of communication (see *ibid.*, p. 2).⁷

The reason for suggesting that the risk of misunderstanding should be seen as constitutive of communication rather than as something external to it stems from Derrida’s observation that the only way in which we can guarantee ‘perfect’ communication – that is, communication in which there is an identity between what the speaker intended to convey and what the listener ‘receives’ – is when the context in which such communications disseminate is exhaustively determined (see *ibid.*, p. 18). Derrida argues, however, that this can never be an empirical reality because in order for communication to be possible there needs to be interpretation, i.e., ‘receivers’ need to make sense of what is being communicated. Derrida thus argues that communication is, in this regard, a fundamentally open process and to claim otherwise – as he sees Austin trying to do by taming the unpredictability of communication – is maintaining an ‘idealized image’ and

‘ethical and teleological determination’ of the context in which communication occurs (ibid., p. 17). The general risk or failure therefore doesn’t surround language ‘like a kind of *ditch* or external place of perdition which speech ... can escape by remaining ‘at home,’ by and in itself.’ On the contrary, this risk is ‘its internal and positive condition of possibility’ (ibid.).

The plausibility of Derrida’s argument becomes clear when we imagine a situation in which language would be *without* risk. In such a situation communication would have become a strictly mechanical, a strictly calculable and predictable process. Under such conditions it would actually be meaningless to intervene in social interaction by means of speech acts. In such a mechanistic universe an utterance such as ‘I promise’ would add nothing to the interaction, because all the possible consequences of any action would already be determined and would already be strictly transparent for all other actors, whose own reactions would already be determined as well. The fact that speech acts can always and structurally fail therefore suggests that human communication is *not* mechanistic but that it is an *event*.

The importance of these considerations does not so much lie in Derrida’s account of the fact that communication relies on interpretation and therefore can always go ‘wrong.’ It rather relies in his insight that if communication would go ‘right’ – that is, if the connection between input and output, between utterance and response, between teaching and learning, would be perfect – we would have ended up in a completely *deterministic* universe in which there is actually no reason for communication as utterances and responses would simply be mechanically connected. This is first of all a universe in which there is nothing to learn. Yet it is also a universe in which there is no possibility for anything new to emerge on the scene. It’s a universe in which invention, in-coming, is no longer a possibility. If we take away the risk involved in communication – and perhaps Derrida would say: if we were able to take away the risk involved in communication – we therefore also take away the opportunity for the in-coming of the other as other. Derrida’s insistence on the necessary role of misunderstanding in communication should therefore not be read as a plea for a release from the rules and constraints of interpretation and understanding – a kind of ‘hermeneutics free-for-all’ (Norris, 1987, p. 139) – but as motivated by a concern for the impossible possibility of the invention, the in-coming of the other. The ‘point,’ in other words, is an ethical and political one but it is, therefore, also an educational one. Let me briefly explain.

Teachers sometimes jokingly say that their job would be so much easier – and could be so much more effective – if they could do it without students. But what may seem the administrator’s heaven should be the educator’s nightmare *if*, that is, the interest of education is not exclusively in the reproduction of what exists – in the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing social, cultural, political, religious, economic, cognitive, and other orders – but is also an interest in the ‘coming into the world’ of something new, of ‘new beginnings’ and ‘new beginners’ to use Hannah Arendt’s terminology.⁸ The simple question, then, is whether we value such inventions – which always announce themselves as interventions (see Fryer, 2004) – or not. The simple question is whether we think that education should *only* be a big reproduction machine, or whether we think that education should *also* express an interest in what we might perhaps best refer to as human *freedom* (see also Biesta, 2007). If the latter is the case, then it might matter that we witness the occurrence of deconstruction in education, as this may point us towards openings that can be a potential entrance for the event of freedom.

DOING AND UNDOING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

In the preceding pages I have engaged in a form of writing on, in and to a certain extent against education that takes inspiration from the work of Derrida. I have tried to demonstrate that such writing is not about the application of a method called ‘deconstruction’ to educational issues.

The most important reason for this lies in the simple fact that deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one. Deconstruction, to repeat Derrida's point one more time, is rather 'one of the possible names to designate ... what occurs [*ce qui arrive*], or cannot manage to occur [*ce qui n'arrive pas à arriver*], namely a certain dislocation, which in effect reiterates itself regularly – and wherever there is something rather than nothing' (Derrida and Ewald, 2001, p. 67). This means, as I have argued, that if we want to use a deconstructive 'register' in our writing we should not aim to deconstruct anything, but should rather engage in witnessing the *event* of deconstruction. I have not only tried to make clear what it might mean to do this, but have also made a case for why I think that witnessing the event of deconstruction in education – that is, trying to point at those moments where conditions of possibility and impossibility 'cross' each other and in their crossing provide a deconstructive opening – matters educationally. Here, my main point has been to argue that a deconstructive opening can become a deconstructive entrance, an entrance for the incoming of something new, something unforeseen – or, in more 'personal' terms, someone new, someone unforeseen. I have articulated the interest in such inventions as a 'genuine' or 'proper' educational interest, although I wish to add that to name this interest as an educational interest is not to suggest that it has always been and will always be an educational interest. It is an interest with a very particular and very specific history (see Biesta 2006; 2007), which means that one of the questions it raises is whether we want to identify ourselves with and take a certain responsibility for this history or not.

Whereas Derrida's writing therefore doesn't offer philosophers of education a method, it definitely has something to offer and in my own work I have tried to take up this offer and run with it, so to speak. But would those writings count as philosophy of education? Let me, in conclusion, make two observations about this in order to (dis)locate the discussion in this paper within the context of 'philosophy of education.'

The first has to do with the question of philosophy in the idea of philosophy of education. As I have mentioned at the very beginning of the paper, Derrida's own work is not simply a continuation of a particular tradition of philosophy but is a form of philosophical writing or writing philosophy that at the very same time raises deep and important – and in a sense unsettling – questions about the very possibility of 'doing' philosophy. Whereas on the one hand Derrida defends the unconditional right of philosophy to ask critical questions (see, for example, Derrida, 1994), he also turns this right onto philosophy itself by asking from what site or non-site philosophy can appear to itself as other than itself 'so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner' (Derrida, 1984, p. 108). It is my view that in this 'move' Derrida transforms philosophy's right to ask critical questions into a responsibility for the affirmation of the impossible, unforeseeable and incalculable event of the in-coming of the other. This transformation puts philosophers in quite a different position, not only in relation to themselves and their traditions and activities, but also, when they take the guise of philosophers of education, in relation to education. In this respect we might say, therefore, that an engagement with Derrida's writings is more than just the adoption of a particular philosophical stance in one's activities as a philosopher of education. It also undoes and unsettles a little what philosophy of education is or might be. It is important to note that this unsettling does not take place at a cognitive level – after all, that kind of unsettling has always been the business of philosophy – but at an ethico-political level. Derrida's writing comes with a responsibility, so to say – a responsibility which I would be happy to characterise (and actually have characterised in my work) as an *educational* responsibility.

This brings me to my second observation which stems from the question how we might be able to identify such a responsibility as an *educational* responsibility. The problem here has to do with the very idea of 'philosophy of education.' 'Philosophy of education' is not only a phrase consisting of three English words – which means that we shouldn't assume that anything that tries to translate itself into these three words can actually be translated that simply.⁹ The

idea of ‘philosophy of education’ belongs to a very particular, Anglo-American construction of the field of educational studies, one in which this field is seen as that of the interdisciplinary study of educational phenomena (see, for example, Tibble, 1966). Philosophy here takes the position of one of the ‘foundational disciplines’ for the study of education, together – at least traditionally – with history, psychology and sociology. The problem with this configuration is not that these disciplines – and others that have been added since – have nothing important to say about education. The problem rather is that when they speak about education they tend to do so with their disciplinary voice. Hence sociology of education asks sociological questions, psychology of education asks psychological questions, history of education asks historical questions, and philosophy of education asks philosophical questions. But if this is so, then one important question emerges: Who asks the educational questions? Unless we are to believe John Dewey who simply (and imperialistically) claimed that educational questions are by definition philosophical questions and *vice versa* – which, as a good deconstructionist would point out, already relies on the very distinction between philosophy and education that it wants to overcome – I have tried to show in this paper that in order to see the educational significance of what follows from deconstruction we need to do more than just apply Derrida’s ‘philosophy’ to the ‘field’ of education since we also need to have a sense of where and why we might find this field. In this way Derrida helps us to see the occurrence of deconstruction in the very idea of ‘philosophy of education’ – which means that doing philosophy of education ‘after’ Derrida also requires some undoing of the very idea.

Correspondence: Gert Biesta, The Stirling Institute of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA Scotland, United Kingdom.

E-mail: gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk.

¹ With the exception, perhaps, of the recipe for ‘deconstructed banoffee pie’ (see http://www.channel4.com/food/recipes/occasions/dinner-parties/come-dine-with-me/series-6/deconstructed-banoffee-pie_p_1.html).

² After all, there is as such nothing wrong with pinning things down as long as we don’t forget why we did that in the first place. Or, in a language that stays closer to Derrida: there is nothing wrong with laws as long as we do not assume that they can fully embody justice – there may always be ‘more’ or ‘different’ justice just around the corner (see Derrida, 1992).

³ For such an ethico-political reading of Derrida’s work in the context of education see the contributions in Biesta and Egea-Kuehne (2001); see also Peters and Biesta (2009).

⁴ This point goes back to a discussion within hermeneutics about the question whether the intentions of the author – or in this case the sender – can serve as the arbiter for the correctness or truth of the interpretation. Gadamer (1994) would object to such an objectivist ambition of hermeneutics, arguing that the open character of interpretation means that the most we can achieve is an ongoing ‘fusion of horizons.’ Derrida, as I will indicate below, radicalises this insight by questioning whether communication does indeed start from the self-transparent intentions of an author (see also Derrida, 1976; 1988).

⁵ I believe that it is important to acknowledge that ‘getting it right’ is part of what education is for. In this regard oppositions between ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ education or between ‘child centred’ and ‘curriculum centred’ education are often unhelpful as they often tend to do not much more than favouring one one-sided position over another. The only important point not to forget, therefore, is that ‘getting it right’ is only *part* of what education is about so that, without connection to other functions and purposes of education ‘getting it right’ becomes as problematic as any other one-sided view (see Biesta, 2009).

⁶ In this regard there is a strong similarity between the practice of education and the practice of government, as government has to deal with the same slippage as education has, and tends to make efforts of a similar scale to ‘tame’ this slippage.

⁷ The reason why Derrida moves from a discussion of performative speech acts to wider questions about understanding and misunderstanding partly has to do with his claim that whereas Austin sees a sharp distinction between the two, his approach actually ends up in a situation where it is not possible to maintain this distinction so

that in Austin “performative communication becomes once more the communication of an intentional meaning” (Derrida 1988, p.14; see also p.16 and p.19).

⁸ In my book *Beyond Learning* I have made a detailed case for seeing ‘coming into the world’ as a central educational category and concept (Biesta, 2006).

⁹ This becomes even more of a problem when acts of ‘counter-translation’ occur and ‘Bildungstheorie’ becomes renamed as ‘Philosophie der Erziehung’ – for example.

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