



JOMEC Journal
Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Published by Cardiff University Press

Editorial: Teaching and the Event

Éamonn Dunne

Trinity College Dublin
Email: edunne6@tcd.ie

Keywords

Jacques Derrida
John D. Caputo
Weak Pedagogy
Hospitality

Abstract

What do we mean when we talk about events? Can we even (really) say we know what an 'event' is? To begin thinking about teaching in terms of the event is to begin thinking about all of those things that happen in our classrooms that we don't and can't control. Thinking the event means thinking about the unthinkable, the unforeseeable and ultimately the unknowable. It is about letting go of a concept – almost impossible to relinquish – that teaching and learning are transparent entities: understandable, limitable, predictable, something we can and do *know* about. Thinking about the event is thinking about what actually *happens*, not what we think should or ought to happen in our classrooms.

Contributor Note

Éamonn Dunne is a research scholar at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. He is currently living and teaching in Bangkok, Thailand, and working on a book on events of unlearning and the philosophy of weak pedagogy. He is the author of *J. Hillis Miller and the Possibilities of Reading: Literature after Deconstruction* (Continuum, 2010), *Reading Theory Now* (Bloomsbury, 2013) and, with Aidan Seery, *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (Punctum, 2016). Research interests include philosophies of the event, radical pedagogies, and literature and trauma.

Citation

Dunne, Éamonn (2016), 'Editorial: Teaching and the Event', *JOME C Journal* 10, 'Teaching and the Event', ed. Éamonn Dunne. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/n.2016.10081>

Introduction: Teaching and the Event

If the system is too tight, too ordered, nothing new can happen. I admit this is risky business. But the point is that playing it safe all the time is also risky business – it risks the prevention of the future, of the event. Nothing is safe. Everything is risky. Now having said this, we can ask, is this structural exposure to the event not a perfect way to describe the institution in general and in particular educational institutions – the administration, the curriculum, teaching ‘methods’, testing and evaluation, everything that goes on in education. A teacher gives a class, or maybe just makes a comment in class, and a student’s life is changed. The teacher does not know she did this, and at the same time neither does the student. That is the event
– John Caputo

We gather ‘around’ the suspension of all knowledge, ability and action. It is only this ‘suspension’ which is between us, and out of which we become we
– Werner Hamacher

The event has been a persistent concern for contemporary philosophers: Derrida, Agamben, Deleuze, Badiou, Nancy, Caputo, Blanchot, Levinas, Žižek, among others. However, with the exceptions of Derrida, Caputo and Nancy these conceptions and theorizations of the event have rarely asked what happens in the moment, the predicament, the unforeseeable event of teaching. This special issue invites considerations of the pedagogical event which would attend patiently to what lies at its heart: a weakness.

When we speak of the weakness of the event of teaching what we are referring to is a weakness which also extends to *all* teaching and *all* reading. Put another way, we do not know what we are doing when we teach, think, or read, but we are a little bit (more than a little bit) in love with our own non-knowledge, with unlearning. And we want to say that this happens *every time* we teach. Indeed, Derrida argues in *A Taste for the Secret* that ‘no repetition will ever exhaust the novelty of what comes’ – that deconstruction, good reading, believing, praying, forgetting, understanding and misunderstanding, knowing and not knowing, happen all the time, out of time, beyond our capacities to justify or comprehend just why or how they happen in exactly the way(s) they happen.

Events just happen. Events shatter our senses; they are unforeseeable; they break in; they irrupt, interrupt, disrupt, disadjust, corrupt. If we could only see an event coming (just one) then it wouldn’t be an event, it would be a prediction, a calculation, something in the order of knowledge – when we speak *about* the event we are not in the order of knowledge. In order for an event to be an event, though the question of being is exactly what the name ‘event’ troubles (ontology slipping into hauntology), it must be, as such, unforeseeable and therefore untheorisable.

Events, we can also say, are incalculable irruptions of the wholly other; incalculable because they belong without belonging to an absolute future about which we can never be certain, a future which we can never see coming. As Derrida puts it in *Rogues*: ‘An event or an invention is possible only as impossible. That is, nowhere “as such” annulling this experience of an im-

possible that never appears or announces itself as such'.

If this is so, if the event is the non-knowable, then how can we even speak of it? How can we know anything about it? How can we know that there is even something called the 'event'? 'What I mean by the event', Caputo writes in *The Insistence of God*, 'is the surprise, what literally over-takes me, shattering my horizon of expectation ... To shatter the horizon of possible experience is to be impossible, to belong to an impossible experience, to belong to an experience of "the impossible"'. A passion for the impossible is what Caputo sees as the pulse of thinking as a passion for knowing, even (perhaps especially) when that knowing doesn't know for sure in which direction it is travelling. A passion for the surprise of knowledge is like an awakening, an event, if we can even call it such, that reinvigorates thinking, a risk, a gambit, a chance that something might come, something absolutely unprecedented, unforeseeable, unpredictable, illimitable, im-possible.

Weak pedagogy is a response to that call, a profession of faith in the vocation of teaching. It is not a matter of controlling the event, or for that matter being able to see it coming from a distance. Events are radical interruptions, arrivals of the wholly other. If we knew what was coming in the teaching situation then the very event-ness of the event would be shut off, foreclosed, annulled. Weak pedagogy is hospitable to that which arrives without calculations, conditions, programs. A weak pedagogy is therefore in a sense metaperformative; a letting come of what will come, a letting come of the other. This kind of thinking requires us to contemplate a new kind of metapedagogy. It requires us to think

about what it means to be *open* to education.

In opening up to the event of teaching the subject supposed to know self-shatters, acknowledging her ignorance, failure, stupidity in a perverse love of unlearning. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once said, ignorance is 'as potent and multiple a thing as knowledge' and that learning often takes place completely independently of teaching. A perverse pedagogics avows that this failure to know is constitutive of the very scene of teaching. Teaching is a passion for the impossible, a suspension of knowledge in and as the event of learning. If weak thinking *is* love, then the risky event of teaching beyond knowledge is a perverse pedagogics which we cannot but be in love with, because that is all that really matters.

In the essays gathered together here, each contributor focuses on what the singularity of the event in the scene of pedagogy has meant to them in their own teaching; unsurprisingly, each take on what it means to experience an 'event' in education is therefore challenging in radically different ways.

John Caputo's interview with T. Wilson Dickinson is, to my mind, the best single introduction available to the question of event in teaching. Readers unfamiliar with Caputo's work will also find this interview an excellent introduction to what he means by 'weakness', 'ethics', 'desire', 'law', and 'justice', as well as the reasons for his passion for both Derrida's and Kierkegaard's writings, and his prayers, tears and hopes for the schools and universities to come, those educational institutions charged with the risky business of 'reformulating' our future: not formulating in the grand old sense of *Bildung*, but reformulating in the more revolutionary sense of a *re-bildung*.

Clayton Crockett's piece, while sharing Caputo's pursuit of the religious dimensions of the event, challenges us to think through questions of transference and love to understand how teaching can 'precipitate' events. In doing so, his piece gathers together an exciting array of first-hand accounts from his own students' relationship with events in classes he has shared with them. That both pieces challenge us to rethink the event dialogically is perhaps not fortuitous; perhaps (*peut-être*) it is only truly through our dialogue with others (and with ourselves *as* others) that we can be open to what comes, to the event(s) of learning and unlearning, not to being-as-such, but to being as *may-being*, to the possibility that something might come from the other side of silence to change us fundamentally at the level of our own subjectivities.

That we are changed by reading literature is such a commonplace among teachers in literary departments that it almost goes without saying. Almost. Reading books, however tritely conceived, can and often does (for better or worse) change who we are, what we think and what we do. It's why we do it; or better, what happens to us, when we do it. Seismic moments in our lives are often mapped by moments when we encounter a book for the first time, by the 'event' of reading: think of Ghandi reading Thoreau, Nietzsche reading Emerson, Mao reading Marx or Chapman reading Salinger. This is also why reading is a risky business, but a risk we must be willing to take.

Mark Edmundson's anecdotal essay on 'Teaching and the Ethics of Reading' challenges us to think of reading as an ethical moment worthy of such risks. That professors in English and American Literature departments make conscious,

ethical decisions to shy away from works challenging contemporary deep-seated beliefs in race, gender, and sexuality, is something of a travesty, since knee-jerk reactions against such works so often miss the point. Edmundson's ironic reappraisal of enlightenment values begs the question that if we focus too stringently on picking out elements of sexism, racism, prejudice, and so on, in literary works – a manoeuvre he by the way endorses – isn't there also the chance that we may be blinding ourselves to the possibilities of events taking place on other levels of reading?

Likewise, Áine Mahon's interpretation of Stanley Cavell's work on Shakespeare opens us up to central questions concerning ethical responses to reading and the very question of what it means to read and even more fundamentally of what it means to teach it. Her argument focuses on the way teaching 'active criticism' and 'textual mastery' as an appropriative technique inevitably leads to predictability and non-response. Using Cavell on *King Lear*, Mahon argues convincingly that intellectual and emotional humility, and above all trust in the words of the text, are essential for opening us up to events. Reading in this milieu becomes an act of faith involving vulnerability and experience.

Both Aidan Seery and Jones Irwin's articles focus on Slavoj Žižek's importance for rethinking the event in education scenarios. Seery's interest is in how one might as educator envisage a manner of teaching capable of developing abilities to anticipate events, a way of nurturing 'pre-evental desire'. Adapting suggestions he finds in the work of Badiou and Žižek, Seery argues that educational policies based on democratic ideals and scientific technological knowledge bases may distract us

from benign intuitions that educational systems are deeply flawed and incomplete narratives.

Such policies often conceal, through commonsensical values and social mores, any possibilities for action and transformation in such a way that conformity is the only legitimate response to a deeply paradoxical system of values. One crucial possibility for changing this, he argues, is the ubiquitous cry that technology is about to radically transform education, but how can we anticipate what will come? Irwin Jones likewise investigates a change in educational philosophy and theory through Žižekian/Lacanian models which have seen a distinct shift in traditional Marxist approaches to false consciousness in lieu of a much more pervasive view of the mechanisms of ideology. What is the importance now, Irwin asks, for educational theory in the wake of the burgeoning appeal of Žižek's writings in educational circles?

Each one of the essays collected here signal us in the direction of a trans-

formation of our habits of thinking about what constitutes an educational experience. Each piece challenges us to think about what it might mean today to work in institutions of learning.

Whether as a student, a teacher, a voyeur, a critic or an advocate, we are immersed in questions of what it means to learn from the event of education. None of us need be complacent about the question of event simply because we don't fully know what we mean when say the word 'event'. This special issue is a first step towards realising the urgent need to respond responsibly to what it is we think we do when we teach our students and how we can be open to the possibility that something might come to radically change us, our students, and our world. What readers might find particularly interesting in this issue is the prevalence of the word 'love' and its cognates in each of these pieces. It is comforting to this reader at least that education is often a synonym here for simple passion.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

www.cardiffuniversitypress.org

This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal*

JOMEC Journal is an online, open-access and peer reviewed journal dedicated to publishing the highest quality innovative academic work in Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. It is published by Cardiff University Press and run by an editorial collective based in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, committed both to open-access publication and to maintaining the highest standards of rigour and academic integrity. *JOMEC Journal* is peer reviewed with an international, multi-disciplinary Editorial Board and Advisory Panel. It welcomes work that is located in any one of these disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary work that approaches Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies as overlapping and interlocking fields. It is particularly interested in work that addresses the political and ethical dimensions, stakes, problematics and possibilities of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

To submit a paper or to discuss publication, please contact jomecjournal@cardiff.ac.uk

Editors: Evelina Kazakeviciute and Alida Payson

Executive Editor: Professor Paul Bowman

www.cf.ac.uk/jomecjournal

Twitter: @JOMECjournal

ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. Based on a work at www.cf.ac.uk/jomecjournal.

