

The Ethics of Surprise

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‘Is there an *ethics* of teaching?’

The answer seems obvious: Teachers are *responsible* people with important duties to fulfil, so to teach must require an acknowledgement of the discipline’s ethical dimension. The connection between ethics, education and the work of *Showing: Expectations* is simple: *Showing: Expectations* investigated the limits of what we understand *responsible* teaching to be via the creation of art. *Showing: Expectations* questioned the existing programmes for encouraging people to enter into education, (specifically the concept of *widening participation*). This was not simply a cynical dismissal of the importance of education; rather it was a way of trying to think and act differently in response to the political exigency to increase access to education. The project, therefore, highlighted what it might mean to teach and to learn from others.

So, to return to our opening question: what does an *ethics of teaching* actually mean? There are certainly contracts, outlines and *guidance* that delineate what, when and how a teacher teaches. We can outline duties and responsibilities for the teacher such that we can account for the teacher’s activity, (in essence, this ability to codify the activity of the teacher means we can claim to *know* what teaching is). We know what the activity *looks like* and can specify when teaching is *happening* or *not happening*. We can, for example, see what delivering – or not delivering – a lecture looks like; what marking – or not marking – coursework is; what fulfilling – or not fulfilling – a curriculum is, and so on. The converse would also seem to be true of students. *Learning Contracts* describe a student’s responsibilities in the activity of studying. In this instance, the student signs up to the programme of education and allows themselves’ to be identified through the habits that make them out to be a student, (doing – or not doing – coursework; attending – or not attending – classes; sitting – or avoiding – exams, and so on). In both cases, input and output can be accounted for by various formal auditing systems, including interview, feedback, observation, training, disciplinary measures, curriculum, and so on.

In all these instances, the *ethics of teaching* is a branch of rationality and part of a programme to establish knowledge and certainty. And however much that wider programme may respect the practicalities and inconsistencies of lived experience, (such that this subset of the programme, called *ethics*, may account for the frailties and *failures* of being human), to describe teaching via an *ethics of teaching* is to presuppose that ethics is teleological (that is to say, directed towards and defined by a final result). That final goal of this teleological programme – of the good teacher and the educated student – is the well-qualified, *skilled*, productive society; a perfectly commendable end, one might think. The problem and contradictions of this rationality and teleology are exposed, however, when we consider what happens to those who are actually excluded by (and from) this ethics of teaching and education. These contradictions and problems form the core concern of the work of *Showing: Expectations*.

The fundamental claim that widening participation in education is teleologically productive is seen in the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (Hefce’s) Strategic Plan from March 2006.¹ In this document, the link between access to education and societal well-being is clear. We read that HEFCE sees:

¹ *Hefce Strategic Plan 2006-11*, available online <<http://www.Hefce.ac.uk/AboutUs/stratplan/>> Accessed online 22 November 2008.

...[t]he drive towards widening participation as fundamental in promoting social inclusion and improving the country's economic competitiveness [...] We also want to focus on the role of higher education in society more broadly, and will develop a strategy on the social dimensions to activities to enhance the contribution that Higher Education Institutions will make to their localities and regions.²

The updated HEFCE plan from May 2008 restates these links:

Growth in student numbers, employer links and widening participation remain as key challenges, reflecting national social and economic priorities.

This link between an educational programme and the *good* society is a classic reinstatement of Plato's educational programme in the *Republic* (with the key revision that in Hefce's plan, education doesn't focus on creating an aristocratic elite, but supposedly incorporates and elevates *all* members of society). The problem Hefce's plan cannot answer is the question of equality, access and difference. People (who are always more than simply *students* or *teachers*) do not neatly correspond to the necessary *blank* template required for increasing the quantity of educational output. Which is to say that people are not empty spaces, waiting to be filled or occupied by culture and knowledge from an *extra-human* dimension. This is what Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, dismissively called the 'banking concept' of education, in which teaching is conceived as a series of knowledge 'deposits' in the student who is considered to be, prior to education, an empty vessel.³

Showing: Expectations demonstrated the contradictions inherent in the widening participation educational programme. It took the programme *at its word* and, simultaneously, critically examined the practical, lived experience of that programme through the creation of art, and, in so doing, foregrounded and questioned the teleological goal of the wider rationality. The inability to respond to the differences and histories that *make* individuals means that not every person can be included in a drive that simply *widens participation*. So however *wide* the access to participation, the notion of *participating* is still predicated on preclusion. By rigorously focusing on the historical and political exclusions that institutions (educational institutions, art institutions such as galleries, financial institutions and funding boards) create through their efforts to incorporate difference, we can understand *Showing: Expectations* to be proposing a *realignment* of the ethics of education.

For *Showing: Expectations*, the effort to engage others, was based on invitation and hospitality to those excluded by traditional educational outreach programmes, (those people who were expressly not *blank*, *empty spaces* waiting to be filled). And instead of *inserting* education into a *vacant* student, *Showing: Expectations* built on the histories and stories people brought with them. What resulted was a different ethics of education, one based not on the integration of duties and responsibilities into a greater good, but a *systematic anarchy* based on respect, risk, difference and a very singular form of engaged aesthetics (which can be understood as being part of this alternative ethics).

We have, therefore, two opposing forms of ethics: one subservient to a philosophy of calculation and management; the other based on uncertainty, hospitality and creation. Let's call this second, alternative ethics the 'ethics of surprise'. What's suggested by 'ethics of

² One of the early proposals from *Showing: Expectations* highlights how this document informs the project. All archived documents relating to *Showing: Expectations* can be accessed on the project website, available online <<http://www.showingexpectations.co.uk/documentation/index.shtml>> Accessed 22 November 2008.

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 72.

surprise' is a way of thinking and being that would not attempt to master the other's differences through a programme of *foreknowledge* (that claimed to know in advance what the other was or wasn't, what the other wanted or hated). An ethics of surprise would not give up its claim to want to know (the ethics of surprise would still be recognisable as a process of responding to others through mediations of knowledge), rather, it would acknowledge its status as a created, creative, shared and respectful process. An ethics of surprise would suggest a logic that could redirect the logical ends of the widening participation debate. This alternative ethics is a position in which the respect for others generates something new and unknowable. It is not simply subsumed into a teleological end. Because this ethics cannot easily be refined into a series of rules, it does not prescribe how we should relate to other people. So, while *Showing: Expectations* was a rigorously planned event, what actually happened when people met in the space was unknowable (indeed, nothing might have happened). Part of its structural premise was, therefore, surprise and a very special 'creative ignorance'.⁴

In part, this alternative ethics of education can be understood via the ideas of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.⁵ Levinas defines ethics as an unconditional responsibility for, and towards, others. In books such as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*,⁶ he suggests that our ethical responsibility exists outside any expectation of what the other might *do* for us in return, and cannot be conceived as part of an economy of exchanging *one good turn for another*. Also, most significantly for a realignment of the ethics of education, we cannot integrate the other into a planned, totalising concept of the good (or *well educated*). Instead, an ethical relation is an almost inconceivable association with the other. It is inconceivable precisely because we cannot claim to know what the other wants or is (we cannot equip ourselves with either good intentions or preconceptions about what must be done – instead, we must respond without actually knowing, in advance, how to). To describe ethics in these terms is to immediately go beyond Hefce's teleological concept for the deployment of education in society.

For Levinas, the scene of encountering the other makes one open to the infinite. What could this mean? The infinite is not something we can possess or imagine. Neither is Levinas suggesting, here, that the other is infinite in a God-like way. Responding to the other is infinite because it means we encounter something or someone who makes us think more than we can think alone. Being open to the other – and the encounter with the infinite – is, therefore, the encounter with social space.⁷ This is an ethics where one's freedom to be (as an autonomous *individual*) is actually preceded by a responsibility to the other – an exorbitant, infinite demand that one can never adequately fulfil in a calculated or managed way.

The consequences of considering *Showing: Expectations* in this way are intriguing. For example, there is a shift in how we are invited to see and experience the work. As mentioned earlier, the work of *Showing: Expectations* could be understood to be an engaged aesthetics. If we follow the logic implied by an ethics of surprise, then we find that the relationship between people and things is not *pre-conceivable*. This is not to suggest that the people and

⁴ What is being suggested here by the term 'creative ignorance' is very close to the emancipatory role of ignorance in education that Jacques Rancière proposes in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross, (Chicago: Stanford University Press, 1991).

⁵ For a good introduction to the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas see the collection of conversations with Philippe Nemo in *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Press, 1985).

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Press, 1969); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Press, 1998).

⁷ "Experience, the idea of infinity, occurs in the relationship with the other. The idea of infinity is the social relationship". Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press, 1993), p. 54.

things that make up the *Showing: Expectations* project *dropped out of the sky*. The people and objects that appeared in the course of the process were embodied and situated, and it was through these embodied histories that we could understand an ethics of surprise incorporating an engaged aesthetics. Aesthetics is traditionally understood to be a theoretical discourse conducted *on art*, but an *ethics of surprise* implies that such a metaphysical superiority over something or someone has to be renounced and cannot hold. We could say that aesthetic theory tends to *evacuate* the life from the objects and people who made those artefacts (the ideas become abstract). Where *Showing: Expectations* altered this kind of aesthetic project was in embracing the sensuous *stuffness* of the things seen in the gallery and the faces and voices of the people as they told their stories and shared their histories.

By focusing on the stuff generated by lived lives, *Showing: Expectations* engaged the rich bodily excess of people into the aesthetic regime of the gallery space (the gallery is understood, here, to be a space marshalled by competing aesthetic claims and discourses). What was seen in the exhibition space during the course of the show didn't quite make *sense* in terms of beauty or categories of form. Rather, the work was meaningful as fragile, funny, human things, and the objects were surprising and disarming because they were valuable to people (not just artists or curators). To suggest that the objects were in some sense *not interesting* was already to have engaged in a thought process that escaped the ethical demand of the objects.

Interestingly, Levinas suggested that the ethical relationship occurs in the face-to-face encounter. Invariably commentators have understood this notion to be a reduction of Levinas' ideas, since it would imply that his ethics is a form of empiricism because it privileges meeting a human visage as the site for the ethical encounter. However, the face-to-face is not simply a direct encounter, but a hermeneutical process and an embodied reading⁸. If this is true, then texts or objects could be *envisaged* ethically; we would engage with them through respecting the demand to understand them. This was certainly apparent in the work that occurred in the creation of the exhibition. Sue Wilks and Leonor da Silva, through the scheduling of the show and the plans for curating the work, could not know what would happen. But experiencing the work through an unexpected interaction (such that the creation of one week became the curated object of week two etc.) meant that when the process of creating the show occurred, the people curating and deciding what to show could not be easily identified as traditional (that is to say, *knowledgeable*) curators. There was no advantage in defining an identity and role through a specialist deployment of knowledge. The project therefore demonstrated the limitations of knowing what will happen in advance.⁹

A further implication of the project, and one which we might consider as part of this ethics of surprise, is the relationship between an ethical response to others and a politics of resistance. Simon Critchley in his book *Infinitely Demanding*¹⁰ developed a very singular form of politics from his interpretation of Levinas' ethics, and the resemblance to what happened in *Showing: Expectations* is striking. Critchley suggests that:

⁸ For a development of these ideas see the introduction to *Re-Reading Levinas*, and the essay in that collection by Jean Greisch called 'The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation'.

⁹ Again, to make a claim in these terms requires caution. What is being suggested here is not that knowledge (and history and philosophy, as discourses focused on the effort to know) can simply be *done away with* in some kind of year zero. Instead, an ethics of surprise would need to counter the system that generates and requires knowledge in forms such as lesson plans (with *learning outcomes*) or exhibition proposals (with detailed, accountable benefits) that reductively prescribe knowledge. These forms of prescribing knowledge also reductively circumscribe identity and stultify agency (and this occurs despite the best intentions and desires of teachers and artists).

¹⁰ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2007).

[w]hat has to be continually criticized in political thinking is the aspiration to a full incarnation of the universal in the particular, or the privileging of a specific particularity because it is believed to *incarnate* [sic] the universal.¹¹

Which is what happens in the effort to widen participation, (which is a political aim from a particular governmental policy). Widening participation results in incorporating difference and plurality (that is, people) into an educational programme that results in the hypostatisation of the *educable student*. Instead, the politics that flows from an ethics of surprise is a (paradoxical) systematic anarchy. This systematic anarchy does not '[s]eek to set itself up as the new hegemonic principle of political organization', rather it is 'the continual questioning from below of any attempt to establish order from above'.¹² Which sounds like a classic anarchic manifesto, but Critchley then states:

Ethical anarchy is the experience of the multiple singularities of the encounter with others that defines the experience of sociality. Each of these singularities overwhelms and undoes us and we can never do enough in response.¹³

Critchley's ethical anarchy is the systematic anarchy implied in the ethics of surprise, and all these responses flow from the invitation to participate and respond to the other, which describes what happens in *Showing: Expectations*. What we see and participate in with *Showing: Expectations* is not democracy (as a fixed political edifice) but an effort to democratise where, as Critchley suggests, 'democratization is politicization'.¹⁴ This politicisation provides form for resistance and a way of making the other demand a reason for acting. From an effort to re-align (and critically question) educational ethics, comes a surprising politics based on a renegotiation of power. However, the ethics of surprise set in motion by the project isn't simply a model to be copied (it isn't simply a new orthodoxy, nor a variation on an aesthetics of relationality). Instead it is a way of being with others based on a response to injustice and exclusion. *Showing: Expectations* proposes an ethical demand to respond to others. As Judith Butler states: 'Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something'.¹⁵

The implications of responding to others are always surprising.

¹¹ Simon Critchley, *Ibid*, p. 119.

¹² Simon Critchley, *Ibid*, pp. 122-23.

¹³ Simon Critchley, *Ibid*, p. 123.

¹⁴ Simon Critchley, *Ibid*, p. 130.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2006), p. 23.