Francis Gilbert/Goldsmiths T and L conference/September 2017

Reciprocity

Ok, I want you to you to shut or lower your eyes, take a few breaths, breathing in I am calming, breathing out I am smiling, and think of a gift you can give to yourself. Go on, give it a try, give yourself a pat on the back for something you’ve done, or not done, congratulate yourself for taking a break, for doing the washing up, for enjoying a cup of coffee, forgive yourself for something you feel guilty about. Go on, give yourself a little gift in your mind.

How did that feel?

I’m going to give you a gift now. The gift of a painful, but I hope entertaining story. A true story.

I am eleven years old. I have just moved schools in the middle of term and everyone here is calling me by my surname, Wilkinson, and it’s weird because in all the other schools I’ve been to I’ve been called my first name, Francis, and it’s also even weirder because Wilkinson isn’t my real surname. In the school yard, I am also called newbie, burke and Dougal because I have long red hair like the puppet Dougal in the Magic Roundabout. My throat feels dry. Then a few weeks later, my name changes. My father has come back from the US where he was working and has insisted I am called by his name, my legal name, Gilbert. This confuses everyone at the school because the teacher offers no explanation and just starts reading out Gilbert in the register and I answer in the affirmative. Some children ask me what is going on but I don’t explain, it upsets me to talk about it. My mother is furious at my father’s intervention and there are letters exchanged with solicitors, court actions threatened, and my name changes yet again to Gilbert-Wilkinson, and then after more battles, Wilkinson-Gilbert. All the kids get so confused, they end up calling me Pilk. I am happy with Pilk, it makes me smile, it’s funny, and I seem to have settled into this minor private school, rather like something out of Decline and Fall, by being the oddball with the ever-changing name. However, just when things have settled, disaster strikes, and my sports’ bag breaks and I am obliged to take my mother’s handbag to school; she insists. We don’t have money to pay for anything else. If the mockery of me had been bad before, now it increases exponentially. Children crowd around me at break times and chant: “Pilky and his handbag, Pilky and his handbag, tra-la-la-la!”

There’s nothing to do but to grin and bear it, but one day, one of the chief chanters, who regularly kicks me as the crowd gathers around to chant, snatches a tennis ball out of my hand just as I am about to bowl a ball in a friendly game of cricket. My reaction is immediate. I punch him in the mouth, and in doing so, break my thumb. I have to go to hospital the next day to have it put in a splint. However, after that weirdly, the chanting, the bullying stops. Many years later, one of the chanters approaches me in a Tube train. We are in our late twenties. “Pilky,” he shouts in his flash designer suit. “It’s you!” He pleased to see me, and we start to reminisce after sharing pleasantries. He says, “Do you ever wonder why everyone left you alone after you punched J?” I shake my head. “It’s because we all thought you were a complete psycho. It was the randomness of it. There you were all those years of abuse, and then suddenly over nothing, you snap.”

Now I’ve given you a gift of this story. I would like you to give the person sitting next to you a gift. It could be just a hello if you don’t know them, a reaction to my story, a nice comment about their appearance, about their work, a blessing, wish peace upon them, ask them a question. Go on, give them the gift of your attention!

How did you find that process? How did it compare with giving yourself a gift? A brief discussion.

You may wonder why I am telling you this anecdote at length for an august, theoretical talk about reciprocity, and with good reason. Well, I think I have a very good reason. You see, I wrote about this incident in a draft of the novel I submitted for my PhD in Creative Writing, and decided working with Professors Blake Morrison and Rosalyn George to share it with my eleven-year-old students who I taught at a large comprehensive in outer London at the time, using it to inspire them to write their own autobiographical pieces. The results were fantastic. The students responded with warmth and sympathy to my story, and wrote their own imaginative reconstructions of childhood scenes, not necessarily about bullying, but about moments when they felt vulnerable, alone, misunderstood, the victim of forces out of their control. In trying to explain this success, Rosalyn guided me to the early work of Ann Oakley, who was a feminist researcher exploring women’s experiences of giving birth, decided to lace her interview with appropriate accounts of her own experiences of giving birth (Oakley, 2013). She found that this approach generated rich data, and argued that it generated reciprocity: when she ‘gave’ something of her own experiences, she received back enthusiastic accounts herself (Oakley, 2005).

As with Oakley, I found my confession created rare and important conversations. bell hooks (hooks, Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, 2003) writes in her chapter ‘Democratic Education’:

Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator. Talking to share information, to exchange ideas is the practice both inside and outside academic settings that affirms to listeners that learning can take place in varied time frames (we can share and learn a lot in five minutes) and that knowledge can be shared in diverse modes of speech. (hooks, 2003, p. 44)

For me, sharing parts of my life with my students generated a conversation with them that happened both on the page and during discussions around school. My confession about “Pilky and his handbag” produced numerous conversations about bullying, about school, and about the complex nature of morality: was I right to punch my persecutor? The learning that took place was varied and possibly not immediately obvious to a “traditional teacher”: some pupils learnt teachers are like them; some thought deeply about violence and victimisation; other learnt about how to tell a good story, how to narrativise their own lives.

Indeed, you could argue that a powerful pedagogical movement is predicated around the idea of reciprocity. The Teachers as Writers initiative, which operates in many schools in the United States and in the UK, encourages teachers to write expressively with their pupils. The idea is simple but very effective: when a creative writing task is set in class, the teacher writes as well. The Teachers as Writers gurus in this country, Jeni Smith and Simon Wrigley, encourage teachers to set open-ended tasks such as asking students to do some free writing, to reflect upon their feelings, to describe a journey and so forth. The teacher then may well share with the students how they found the process of writing, or their own writing. The approach encourages teachers to not only intellectually grasp what it means to be a writer but also to feel it, and to share their feelings with their students. This open-hearted approach generates reciprocity with students more willing to share their own work and consider ways of improving it precisely because they’ve seen a teacher model these processes.

In their article *What has writing ever done for us? The power of teachers’ writing groups* Wrigley and Smith (2012) discuss the importance of teachers writing both expressively and transactionally both in and outside the classroom:

if we are to engage seriously with young people as they write…we need to have the personal knowledge not only of the craft but also of its complex and uncertain personal processes (p. 80)

Cremin and Oliver (2016) found that when secondary school students on Arvon courses worked with professional writers and their English teachers on their writing, both teachers and students became more engaged with writing, produced much more original pieces than before, and felt part of a community of writers (p. 3). Students improved in confidence, motivation and were much more positive about writing generally (p. 4).

I would argue that reciprocity plays a vital role in the success of the Teachers as Writers movement: when the students perceived that their teachers were feeling just as nervous about writing, just as worried about drafting, going through the same struggles as them, there was a moment of commonality, a sense that ‘we’re in this altogether’ which led to both a loosening up and expanding of their voices. As one student told me, “When we see you struggling to write something, when we realise that you find it really hard, then it makes us want to have a go.”

But what is reciprocity? The dictionary defines it as: “the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit”. For me though this does not get it because it involves someone giving something but not necessarily knowing what they will get back. It involves a leap of faith upon the part of the giver, a risk which you don’t know whether it will pay off or not. It’s perhaps because of this, it often produces much more surprising and creative results than a simple exchange. I have seen this most vividly while researching a teaching technique called ‘Reciprocal Teaching’ (RT): it is sometimes known as Reciprocal Reading because it is largely used when reading texts, although it can be used many other situations. was “Reciprocal Teaching” (RT). This is a reading intervention which has been shown to improve comprehension skills of children across the globe, particularly students with Special Educational Needs for whom it was first developed in the mid-1980s by two researchers, Palinscar and Brown (1984). Enthused by what I read about the technique and seeing the links between it and my own PhD research into reciprocity, I decided to trial it with my classes a few years ago: after a bumpy start (it takes a little bit of explaining), I found it to be very successful and really improved students’ reading skills in part because it put the onus on the students to collectively work out the meanings of difficult texts rather than getting the teacher to tell them. My challenging Year 9 classes (14 year olds) relished reading Of Mice and Men using the strategy, while my Year 12 class found that they could understand Sylvia Plath’s difficult poetry better by discussing it in groups. In my role as Teacher-Educator at Goldsmiths, I have shown my PGCE English students how to use RT, with students using it successfully with their own classes. I have also conducted action research with two schools: Rodilian’s Academy in Wakefield Yorkshire and Deptford Green just across the road. Both schools serve many disadvantaged students who struggle with their reading. At Deptford during the summer of 2016, using a script I had written which modelled the strategy by explaining RT in the form of a play which students read together, I went returned to the classroom, learning a great deal about what worked and what didn’t. The following academic year, 2016-2017, I wrote another teaching script, *The Time Devil*, in collaboration with the National Maritime Museum and Deptford Green students and teachers. Then two brilliant teachers at Deptford, both alumni of the Goldsmiths English PGCE course, Vikki Prescott and Tom Watts taught the Time Devil to their Year 7 and 8 classes, culminating in them visiting the museum, and us shooting a mock documentary based on the script in the museum. Again, it was very successful and showed the students the power of reciprocity. I’m not going to give you a training session on RT right now, but instead share with you what some students have said about it:

* “It’s a lot easier to keep up; you can go a bit more at your own pace, and get help if you don’t understand.”
* “Everyone gives their feedback and so you can get their ideas, and that helps you think differently.”
* “There is more time to think and that means you get more ideas.”
* “Everyone has a chance to contribute. I don’t really say anything in whole class discussions, but I talk a lot in my group.”

Reciprocal teaching has had a transformative effect upon Vikki’s teaching: she is going to be using it with her GCSE classes next year because it nurtures the sorts of independent reading skills that the new GCSE English requires. What RT does when taught well is get students to internalise the processes of summarising, questioning, predicting and reflecting which they acquire through group discussions. Every student is expected at some point to become a teacher and take on all the other roles.

But my research has made me think that there is a larger role for the concept of reciprocity in society. When he was Home Secretary, Tony Blair, talked about how we all need to be aware of our rights and responsibilities; seeded within this soundbite was a notion of reciprocity, but for me a bit of a narrow one. The concept of ‘responsibility’ is invested with notions of moral goodness, of burdensome duty. The concept of reciprocity reprises that idea that if we take things we should give something back, but in a much more flexible, open-ended way. You smile at me, I smile back spontaneously. You explain an idea to me, I share related ideas with you. You teach me a concept, I try my best to understand it. You tell me a story, I tell you one too. Reciprocity is a rhizome, not a tree: it spreads its roots equally throughout a group, a community, the world, it is not hierarchical, tit-for-tat, but instead seeks to bring pleasure and joy to everyone through fruitful, surprising exchanges.

In these times when we are facing environmental catastrophe because we are releasing so much carbon into the atmosphere because of our over-consumption of stuff, reciprocity has a huge role to play in lessening our carbon-footprint and improving the quality of our lives. If we were able to develop more reciprocal communities who spoke to each other, shared stories and possessions, then possibly, we might be happier and help our poor ailing earth.

# References

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