

lecture in the shape of a dovetail joint

Judith Leemann

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Lecture in the shape of a dovetail joint, a title that inserted itself in my thinking within days of receiving the invitation to speak here today. Embarrassing then to discover only yesterday that the shape I've been mulling over is actually called a butterfly joint. A butterfly joint, looking like two dovetail joints joined at the narrow end, used to mend a split in wood. But lecture in the shape of a butterfly joint sounds like something other than what I intend. So I stick with lecture in the shape of a dovetail joint. At the risk of offending woodworkers and wordworkers alike.

This shape I've been mistakenly calling a dovetail joint figures prominently in the work of the German wood turner Ernst Gamperl. Gamperl turns simple cylinders out of green wood. As the wood dries, the thin walls of the cylindrical bowl sometimes start to crack. When this happens, Gamperl arrests the split with small dovetails set across the crack (again, for the woodworkers, when I say dovetail, you think butterfly.) To perceive one of Gamperl's bowls is to see instantly the entire sequence of how it came to be—the meticulous crafting of a material unfit to hold its shape, the watching, the stay placed at the very moment the material fails. A play of forces enacted through the man, hardly within his control, but neither out of it. Recognizing his gesture, there arises in me something like heartbreak. [I once overheard a man asked whether he thought something he'd experienced was a divine revelation. He responded, "It certainly had the structure of a divine revelation."] Fleeting, but distinct. A pang. And the pang has everything to do with seeing in these turned bowls evidence of a way of being, evidence of an attitude of hand and mind, evidence of something that rarely occurs to me.

I've been gathering instances of a sort. Let Gamperl serve as the first. Let what follows serve as a second. In the fall of 2007, in a high school in rural Nova Scotia, a freshman boy arrived on the first day of school wearing a pink shirt. And the boy's pink shirt won him the attention of the school bullies who verbally and physically harassed him. Faggot. Queer. And so on. Something that happens all the time, for which school boards write policies and counselors deliver protocols. Two seniors at the school, having heard what happened, and having had enough, spent the evening sending out word to everyone they knew. The next morning, when they arrived at school, when the bullies arrived at school, when the boy bullied arrived at school, they found themselves, one and all, in a sea of pink. The e-mails circulating the night before were a call to show up wearing pink, and the majority of the student body got it and stepped up.

Sad epilogue to this story. Sad not for the boy nor for the bullies, but for those of us who at a distance love this gesture—the surprise, the full on flipping of context. On September 25, 2007 at 2:30 PM the province of Nova Scotia proclaimed the second Thursday at the start of each school year as Stand Up Against Bullying Day on which all students and teachers should wear pink to show their opposition to bullying. One wild horse caught, corralled, broken. One wild, spirited horse tethered to a dull dull plow.



If I had my way, I would now follow these instances with a brilliant deconstruction of the nature of first and second order intervention, would elucidate the way some gestures travel as modern day fable, morality tales for a folk that resist being told too directly what they can—still—possibly do. But I don't have it yet, I don't know how.

What I will say is this – that it's one thing to look back on such instances and to recognize them, even to describe them. But the capacity of mind that allows retrospective recognition is not the same capacity of mind that thinks to flip every shirt in the school to pink.

So if these elegant indirect gestures, these moments of contextual mischief-making, arriving as they do within the everyday as within the arts demarcated as such, are what matters to me If my role is that of educator And if by some strange grace I am given an invitation to invent something for a summer arts intensive for high school students, then what kind of class do I invent? Is it possible to invent a classroom in which my retrospective appreciation for a certain kind of move is catapulted into some sequence of activities that stimulates the kind of thinking that actually *does* such things? Thinks *of* and *toward* such things? What might that teaching look like?

Do I send one student out of the room and ask him to come back wearing a pink shirt, assign the bullies and the interventionists their roles while he's gone and then restage the whole thing? Do I really want more pink t-shirt days? [See note on not generalizing, below.]



In the summer of 2006 I was invited by the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to propose a course for a revamped pre-college program. The program takes its format from that of the school itself, interdisciplinary in its offerings, and in fact insisting on this interdisciplinarity. For five weeks, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. the students take the same classes, rotating in groups of 12 through a disciplinary grid—drawing and painting and video and sound and installation and photography and printmaking and sculpture and something with the deliberately unhelpful title of *Artist in Action*. When I was asked to propose the class, it had been three years since I'd attended the summer school whose ending we mark today, two years since I'd served as teaching assistant for the same. And six years since I'd last worked as a facilitator on a corporate team-building ropes course. If you're picturing guys in suits being given only two logs, a rope, a tin can, and ten minutes to figure out how to get across the hot lava pit (okay, wood chips in a parking lot) then you're on the right track. It's easy to make fun of such things. Painful, cheesy and forced. And still, some remarkable things happen in that place of wood chip hot lava.

When I thought about what class I'd like to propose, the thing that came to mind was a collision of sorts, a monstrous concoction, the galloping ungainly offspring of ropes course and summer school. Yes. Play the team-building games with their branded tubes and balls and pre-written instructive scenarios and the start line and the finish, and drop

from that into timed writing from prompts. I never drop the ball. And back again to the props with the instruction to build in small groups some kind of looping pattern that could potentially go on forever, and then to performing these loops for three minutes, long enough, I tell my students, to guarantee we get bored. Because we want boring. At least as a starting point, I say.

So it begins. Three summers now, seeing five groups of twelve to thirteen students each, for three hours, once a week. Artist in Action, or as one student dubbed it, Artist Inaction, the nondoing of it all.



Moiré patterns—those things which are emergent, which are dynamic result. Second order phenomena that can only be addressed indirectly—the result of something else, of an interaction, not a thing in and of themselves. We can make the underlying pieces, the lines that will interact, can provide time and experience with these “toys,” these “games.” But we must never put an image up—a still of moiré—because that’s not moiré, that’s a still of moiré and with our stubborn habit of seeing *things*, we risk misunderstanding the resultant image as being something that can itself be directly made.



I’m stocking a toolbox—of images, of stories, of illustrations. Second order, feedback loops, negation as the informational equal of assertion. A story of parents who each sleep under their own electric blanket, with their respective controls by their bedsides. Their kids decide to play a joke on them and switch the plugs so that mom’s dial actually controls dad’s blanket and dad’s dial actually controls mom’s blanket. They go to bed, turn their blankets on to their preferred settings. Assuming there is a difference in their preferences, and this is the case in the story I heard, and say mom likes it hotter than dad, then mom isn’t warm enough, turns her dial up, which actually warms dad, who turns his dial down, cooling mom further, she turns her dial up, he turns his down and on. Gregory Bateson called this kind of runaway positive feedback loop schismogenesis and argued that the nuclear escalation of the cold war was another such pattern.



A game from week three of Artist in Action. The students are asked to capture a gesture—something they saw someone do during the week—to memorize it. We do several different things with this gesture, but the most fun is, in small groups of three and four, grafting the gestures onto the game of rock, paper, scissors. Not only grafting and learning all three gestures, but coming up with a logical reason for what beats what. When I introduce the task, everyone gets it right away. *It is difficult and it is doable by everyone in the room.* Laughing as they try to unlearn rock paper scissors even as they must remember enough of it to play the new game. Lion nerd sassy girl. Sassy girl beats nerd, because she’s more popular. Nerd beats lion, because he can outsmart him. And lion eats sassy girl, because he can. Bite twinkle fold. Bite chomps twinkle. Twinkle fondles fold. And fold smothers bite. We pick a favorite, hold a tournament and crown a champion. Later when I need it, I can say of addressing a particular complication: let your logic here be like what we did with rock paper scissors, and everyone knows what I mean.

I'm flying blind here. I'm giving tasks for which there is always a solution, and it's never a thing I hold. What do you call this way of teaching? I try out the handle "recess for smart kids" in a small gathering of other faculty members. I can see they don't like it. They think I'm dismissing what I do in the class, that I'm talking about it as extra. And in their response I see what they understand by recess.

There is no content in this class. This is a content-free classroom.

My students play for three hours a week. They play at things they have never before encountered. They love it, they get it. Perhaps one of them will come up with language for what we do that is better than I have right now. Santiago Cardenas, a student from last year's program meets the rambling questions I e-mail him in preparation for today with remarkable precision. Embedded in his response, this: It's as if the things that convince us most effectively of the truth refuse to refer to themselves in any clear or identifiable way.

This summer, 168 students into teaching the class, it's clear to me that the notion of games and playing is what organizes the class. But then how is one minute standing before one's peers, doing nothing, simply allowing oneself to be watched, a game?



Having received the invitation to talk today, to respond to the statement "What I have learned cannot be generalized but it can be shared," I did the responsible thing, the only thing. I went to Amazon, and ordered the H el ene Cixous book from which the sentence is taken. How could I write in response to this sentence without knowing from whence it came?

But the next day a shape presents itself, insisting I attend. A simple shape—wide at the top, narrow in the middle, and, mirrored across a horizontal axis, wide again at the bottom. The shape of an hourglass if curves is what you've got, the shape of a dovetail (butterfly) if a chisel's what you've got.

And what the shape suggests to me is this—that to take the invitation to respond to this phrase at its face and full value is to consider not only what the invitation contains—what this sentence contains, but also that the invitation has a limit inscribed around it, that the limit of what is given to be known is as much an invitation as what sits inside the limit.

Take the single sentence as the narrowing—the functional part of the hourglass, the constraint that makes an hourglass a timekeeping device and not a pile. Given the sentence and the shape, I find myself inclined to look from the narrowing inward—all that the sentence suggests within itself (call on William Gass, Gertrude Stein) as if the sentence were a shard and the rest of that Cixous book unavailable to me. Might this be one of those shards that has within its structure everything that is the larger whole? Might I deduce the content of the book from this fragment alone? And if not, isn't the limit what makes the invitation? You ask me to come to dinner. You ask me at the same time not to

come over in the morning or later in the afternoon or the next day at all. You forbid me these other times so that we may both anticipate my arrival, late in the day, for dinner.

I go from the shard, the narrowing, upwards, and I ask myself what species of sentence is this, what species of invitation? I am asked to come as a student in a lineage, to reflect on that lineage. The implication is that the lessons failed to take in some interesting way, otherwise why invite me back? A flaw in transmission, a stubborn persistence, something got in the way of transfer and it's that we're here to see—what failed to take.

The sentence: What I have learned cannot be generalized, but it can be shared.
So let's go.

1. Why can't it be generalized? Self-reflexive, circular, snake-biting-its-tail answer, because the thing learned is one of that species of thing that does not allow itself to be generalized. And this, *What I have learned* establishes without a doubt that something has been learned, something which will not be directly named, will only be spoken around.

2. I will not read Hélène Cixous.

The anxiety that attends never enough. To say this is enough—the grace of that—to bear an easy relationship with the notion of limitation.

To regard not having, limiting, the negations one arrays around the border, *as* a border, as being equally self-making as the contents one presses into that boundary. The Cixous, the Deleuze, the Eiffel, the morel, cooking fiddlehead fern for the first time, with butter and a touch of sea salt. What is left?

We have reached a turning point. From here we will unlearn. We will leave confections behind glass for another. We will wait. We will feel ourselves as much in leaving as in taking.

We will look to *not* for its promise. We are full enough already, have eaten our share by noon and continue until late in the evening. We are heavy. I am heavy. That I cannot eat just one—and I think the *cannot* came before the advertisements—this is not a problem for reality TV or for a nutritionist, this is for me a creative problem, a failure of the imagination. I have yet to conceive of an encompassing thought within which leaving the second cookie (okay, the seventh) is as interesting as eating it. Is as rich an experience, as much an event, as sensate a moment.

What kinds of things can't be generalized—emphasis on this being what matters to her to have learned? And how is generalizing different than sharing?

Context. To generalize is to say because it worked to push hard for what I want in this instance then pushing hard for what I want should be done in all instances. Generalizing is like maximizing, is saying that something which is good in one time and place

(substitute for good: productive, clever, rewarding, satisfying, salutary) will be good in all times and places, which slides quickly into more is better than less.

It ignores the relational nature of determining whether something is clever, rewarding, salutary.

Like saying I will read only as much as I honestly need. Resisting the anxious drive to take it all in, to suck dry the ink and paper tit.

Reading and digestion. Intake and expulsion. That which happens of its own accord. When the trigger wants re-setting. When we go on binges, when we fall out of, overrun that which is ours. The grace of just enough. The biological imperative of just enough and no more. Just so much. Just so fast. Twice a good thing is not always better.



For much of my twenties I made a living as a math tutor. One day I was working with a student who got the concept of basic algebra just fine but who frequently made strange leaps of logic that landed him with inexplicable solutions. I'd been working on getting him to recognize the moment he made these leaps. I'd made him a long list of problems, varying them this way and that, and was watching as he solved them.

In the middle of solving one problem, and indeed at the moment he'd just dropped out of algebraic thinking into whatever else he was doing, he suddenly stopped and said, "wait that's not right." I was thrilled—this was working. He was becoming able to both solve the problem and to watch himself solving the problem, acting as an external eye to his own working. "Yes," I say. "Excellent. And how did you know that wasn't the way to go?" And his response, "Because you made that face you always make when I'm about to do something wrong."

Content is the last thing we're teaching.

Gregory Bateson used the term deuterio learning to talk about this second-order learning. To describe not the level of teaching which has to do with content but that level that is the context of content, all the hows of how content is moved, if such a thing were actually possible, content moving like freight from one port to another.



I'm becoming comfortable teaching what I don't know. This summer, I'm working with a group of young community activists participating in a six-week design institute at the Boston-based Design Studio for Social Intervention. They are designing large urban games as interventions in their own neighborhoods, neighborhoods better known for shooting than for playing. I work alongside them as artist in residence, charged with the task of finding concrete ways to make system dynamics legible to them as they talk about social violence, as they look to intervene in the habits of their neighborhoods. Early on, one of the design studio principals introduced the notion of an arc of participation. Someone might just watch a game one day, he says, and then asks, what is more than

that? And the answer comes, to actually play the game. And more than that? To bring friends to the game. And more than that? To initiate a game of one's own. And so on. Afterwards as we debrief I realize I want to add a layer to this notion of an arc of participation. I stand up and say here is the experience of being one place on the arc. I take a step forward and I say now I also have the experience of being in this second place on the arc. And here comes the part that matters to me. I also have the experience of having stepped from one place to another. This *stepping* is what matters to me. Formally it sits one logical level above the experience of being in any particular location, this moving from one place to another. An increase in dimension, as when the single dimension of a name, Boston, becomes the two dimensions of a map drawn by a young man who has lived his life in its segregated streets, to the three dimensions we encounter as we stand in Dudley Square, to the four dimensions we try to hold in mind as we ask ourselves what can we do in these other dimensions that will allow us change.



On the first day of the Goat Island Summer School in which I participated, in 2003, I recall no one introducing themselves. We did not start in a circle stating our names. We did not say where we were from nor what our favorite ice cream was. Nor what breakfast cereal best represented us. Nor were there nametags. There was a distinct lack of naming oneself, of speaking of oneself, about oneself. There was movement I recall, and writing. But a writing that was solving someone else's problem, a movement that was impossible and expected, expectant.

So you come to know a place indirectly.

Those things which can only be taught indirectly. If what I care about is the crafting of steps, or better, the craft of stepping, then I still need something for us to step from and to or around or over and under. And these things must be real enough that the stepping is not a creepy miming of stepping, or an acting out of what we think stepping should look like. But the things serving as steps must also be negligible, lest they be mistaken for content. Games work well in this role. Something real but not important.

Say more about deuterio-learning. Cite Bateson. Make it fit the structure of a dovetail. Finagle that translation. Let language lift here and there. Work in William Gass's architectural scanning of sentences. Justify my hunch that "what I have learned" is a woman walking out of a door onto a broad plaza, her arms widening in a gesture that might mean welcome or might mean behold. That "cannot be generalized" is her turning on the *ck* of cannot and walking straight back through the doorway, arms loose by her sides. That "but it can be shared" has her climbing a ladder, stepping out onto the second floor balcony, overlooking the plaza.