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# Healed Femurs and Artistic Toeholds: Making the Case for “Re-Gifting” Learners’ Educational Confessions

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**Abstract:** Widely accepted adult education methods often lead learners into confessional rituals. While confession is sometimes considered to be “good for the soul,” Michel Foucault’s (1990) deconstruction of confession in *The History of Sexuality* argues that confession is dangerous and that Western assumptions about the curative and liberatory effects of confession are erroneous. In this paper I uncover flaws in Foucault’s assumptions and contend that his claims cannot be applied universally. Then, utilizing Lewis Hyde’s (1983) definition of gift exchange, I theorize a “re-gifting” approach for adult educators to use when confronted with learners’ confessions. This theoretical project’s approach transforms the confessional rite into gateways for collaborative inquiry, rhetorical agency, artistic self-creation, and healing.

## Foucault’s Indictment

Confession has been described variously as the process involved in taking responsibility; letting go of excuses and self-exoneration; sorrow over wrong-doing; or a desire to change one’s life. In religious life, confession is the beginning of change or conversion. Likewise, psychotherapists have regarded secrets in themselves as discreditable. Jung (1933) wrote that keeping secrets acts like a psychic poison, alienating their possessor from the community.

Confession, of course, is not relegated only to the realm of religious or psychotherapeutic experiences. Adult educators regularly encounter students’ confessions. By fulfilling regular institutional, logical, and strategic teaching tasks and implementing widely-accepted instructional methods and techniques, adult educators—with and without full-knowledge of their actions and roles—structure, facilitate, and “fall into” confessional rituals. Although all adult educators may be faced with trying to cope with learners’ confessions, anecdotal evidence suggests that confession is much more frequent when the educator’s approach asks students to unearth assumptions, question values, analyze oppression and privilege, and challenge entrenched prejudices and biases. Stirring students’ critical faculties tends to prompt examination of their own words, actions, beliefs, and assumptions. Confronted with new and troubling information or realizations about their own value system often creates disequilibrium and cognitive dissonance. Learners’ responses to these troubling intellectual or emotional situations are, according to Foucault (1990), the desire to tell “whatever is most difficult to tell” (p. 59).

It is a familiar story to any seasoned adult educator: Learners spontaneously pour out their personal stories in corporate classrooms, mentoring sessions, academic papers, and GED writing assignments. In trying to sort through their ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, learners frequently confess their secrets: cheating, lying, bullying, or being harassed, addictions, abortions, incest, rape, or domestic violence. Learners disclose their fears, failures, dashed dreams, doubts, transgressions, victimization, faith, and hopes. They confess their moral dilemmas and the many ways in which they are not “whole.” These confessions often leave adult educators wondering how to respond appropriately and how, or if, they should try to help.

Educational confession, however, is not just a practical concern; it is also a philosophical and ethical issue. Michel Foucault's (1990) deconstruction of confession in *The History of Sexuality* argues that we live in a "singularly confessing society" (p. 59) that promotes in people an internal imperative to "tell that which is most difficult to tell" (p.59), especially when the subject of confession entails sexual experience. However, Foucault maintained that we must question confessions' curative and liberatory effects. Confession, Foucault claimed, is a ritual fraught with danger, an institutionalized process through which one becomes increasingly normalized and docile. Foucault's theory seized upon similarities in several confessional institutions: religion, psychiatry, medicine, jurisprudence, *and* education. He argued that these vast, inter-related, and heteromorphous institutions create a web of power relations from which escape is impossible. In fact, Foucault's theory of confession serves as the foundation of his panoptic vision of domination. He argued that confessor and confessant, analyst and analysand, doctor and patient, jurist and defendant, *and* teacher and student are entangled in a web of power relations that continually reinforce dominant social hegemonies. Furthermore, the confessants provide their stories to religious, psychiatric, and educational experts who in turn use those stories as raw data for their disciplinary discourse. From the confessants' own words the experts develop definitions that distinguish healthy/ill; normal/abnormal; natural/unnatural. Then, according to Foucault, when those definitions are developed we internalize the labels and hate in ourselves anything that contravenes the first factor in each of those categories.

Re-examining educational confessions in light of Foucault's description and analysis, the relationship is evident between learners' disclosures born of educational disequilibrium and the ancient rite of confession. The educator morphs into confessor and the student dissolves into confessant. Then, the power relations inherent in the confessional rite trap adult educator and learner into an ancient performance that reinforces social hegemonies, including the educator's own authoritative position. For in the rite of confession it is the confessor who is the actor; the confessant is acted upon. Like our religious, medical, and legal counterparts, educators listen and question, comfort and console, interrogate and interpellate, analyze and explicate, reconcile and admonish, forgive, or assure that no forgiveness is necessary. The confessant may feel better, but, according to Foucault, he/she has relinquished interpretation, definition, and labeling into the hands of another and in so doing becomes more docile, more normalized.

Foucault presents us with a theoretical quagmire: both educator and learner, it would seem, are participating in the learners' ever-increasing subjectification. If that is true, then assuming the role of confessor to our learners is antithetical to our role as educators, which charges us with helping students develop intellectual curiosity, critical thinking skills, enhanced decision-making abilities, and preparation for the world of work and citizenship. Yet, working within the strictures of the ancient confessional rite Foucault theorizes that few possibilities remain for agency or individuality, much less artistry.

### **Indicting Foucault**

I contend that while many of Foucault's conclusions are persuasive, others are suspect. Certainly, I believe with Foucault that confession in and of itself is neither curative or liberatory. On the other hand, the testimonies of many confessants indicate that some confessions both heal and free. Yet, Foucault's evidence asserts that expert discourse normalizes and that its evolution depends in large part upon data collected from penitents, patients, prisoners, and students. What, then, could account for these dramatically different perspectives?

I argue that while Foucault's assertions may be true in part, his assertions are based upon assumptions born of his own "gender-blind"<sup>1</sup> masculinist, elitist thinking. That is, while Foucault's work sought to expose and resist normalization and the social hegemonies that restrict individual freedom, some of his rhetorical strategies were arguably as patriarchal and elitist as the institutions that he critiqued. There are numerous examples from his work that provide evidence for my claims. However, as William James so famously, but inelegantly, declared: "To upset the conclusion that all crows are black, there is no need to seek demonstration that no crow is black; it is sufficient to produce one white crow. . ." (Murphy and Ballou, 1960, p. 41). Consequently, I shall provide "one white crow" to demonstrate the ways in which Foucault's analytical assumptions were fueled by a masculinist rhetoric that trivializes much of the harm done to women and girls.

In volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault sought to demonstrate how sexuality has been brought under the auspices of psychiatric, medical, and legal discourse through confessional techniques. He related an incident from nineteenth century France in which a farmhand was arrested by authorities for sexually molesting a small girl. Foucault (1990) described the situation as follows: "At the border of a field, he had obtained a few caresses from a little girl, just as he had done before and seen done by the village urchins round about him. . ." (pp. 31-32). He further explained: ". . . this village halfwit . . . [gave] a few pennies to the little girls for favors the older ones refused him" (pp. 31-32). Foucault's assessment of the situation asserts that it was merely "barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and alert children. . ." (pp. 31-32).

Foucault's account of this incident is both elitist and patriarchal. Not only did he unsympathetically characterize the adult as a "half-wit" and the little girl as "alert" or "precocious," but he also assumed that the little girl was completely unharmed by this sexual encounter and that her participation in this "game" was uncoerced. If that was the case, why was there a need to exchange "a few pennies" for the girl's participation?

Furthermore, in this depiction of an adult male paying a young girl for sex, what did Foucault (1990) see as significant?

The pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become . . . the object not only of collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration. (p. 31)

He suggests that the judicial and medical "experts'" responses exceeded the event's significance.

Foucault wished to unsettle any smug assumptions by his readers that we can presume to understand the emotional nature of a sexual experience. But neither could Foucault! In labeling the episode "petty" and "inconsequential," "an everyday occurrence" and an example of simple "bucolic pleasures," Foucault privileges a patriarchal, masculinist, heterosexualized, and elitist reading of the events—a reading which completely silences the little girl's point of view.

Foucault's focus was on demonstrating the extent to which confession constrained individual agency because of the powerful web of power circulating around confessional institutions. However, his own biased assumptions masked the difference between confessing a sexual transgression and bearing witness against such a transgression. Consequently, while it seems ill-advised to dismiss Foucault's claims completely, we do need to bear in mind the

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin, J.R. (1981). Presidential Address. *Philosophy of Education 1981*. (pp.70-87) for her discussion of the difference between "gender blind" and "gender sensitive."

substantive differences in the types of learners' confessions that we hear and remain mindful of the very real dangers of reinforcing hegemonies and the tendency toward further subjectification.

### **Re-Gifting Confession**

In view of the foregoing argument, I suggest that we may be able to sidestep the hazards against which Foucault cautioned by "re-gifting confession." In fact, I will argue that when teachers re-gift students' confessions the results may be healing, liberatory, and artistic. My theory draws upon the model of gift exchange conceptualized by Lewis Hyde (1983).

Hyde maintained that gift giving is based on transfer of property from one person to another with no expectation of return. Citing several ancient Native American cultures as gift economies, he explained that these gift cultures circulate gifts, but do not exchange them. That is, Person A may give a gift to Person B. Grateful for Person A's gift, Person B gives that gift, or one of equal value, not back to Person A, but to Person C. Eventually, Person A will receive a gift, but never from the person to whom he originally gave a gift. In other words, in gift economies, gifts "go around the corner" (p. 16). When a gift is given there is no expectation of receiving anything in return. Thus, individuals in these gift economies always feel indebted to someone whom they cannot repay, creating a pattern of indebtedness and subsequent generosity. Gift economies, then, build relationships and communities.

In stark contrast to gift economies is an economy based on market exchange. In a market exchange, Person X deeds property to Person Y. Person Y either must pay a fair price or trade something of equal value. They barter until they strike a balance where both parties feel that they are giving and receiving something that is fair. Consequently, market exchange is based on *quid pro quo*. The parties must balance the scales and perceive the exchange to be equitable. In a market exchange the *quid pro quo* means that neither party feels indebted. Without indebtedness, there is no need for gratitude, because gratitude stems from being unable to repay a debt. Market exchange, then, focuses on making a good bargain, not on building good relationships.

I suggest that this notion of gift economy and the pattern of generosity and indebtedness that develops therein is an excellent foundation for building an educational approach to confession. Therefore, in what follows I theorize five interrelated "attitudes" that comprise the educator's role in "re-gifting" confession. I suggest that this approach can work against hegemony and normalization by engendering creative, thoughtful, generous giving.

The first "attitude" in re-gifting confession is to cling firmly to our role as teachers. It is important to refrain from acting as jurist, psychotherapist, or priest, even though our learners may well need to contact all three. When a learner's confession speaks of abuse, violation, harassment, or marginalization it is very tempting to slip into a role for which we are neither academically or emotionally prepared. By holding fast to an attitude of teaching we serve in a special capacity that can serve as conduit for further action.

Re-gifting confession also requires an attitude of giving, as opposed to market exchange. Lewis Hyde (1983) indicates that one of the primary differences between the giving of gifts and market exchange is intent or attitude. Giving means expecting nothing in return. It accepts the fact that the students with whom we work owe us nothing, that we have no expectations for repayment, and that they are free to take or leave our assistance. Expecting the learner to follow our suggestions or heed our advice smacks of the *quid pro quo* of market exchange.

The third attitude in re-gifting is that of befriending. I use befriending here in that strong sense conceptualized by Susan Laird (2002). She developed the idea of befriending as a

life practice whereby teachers deliberately bestow friendship on students and support the friendships of peers and others, rather than seeking or holding on to friendship for themselves. Befriending is especially crucial when our students' confessions are attempts to bear witness. In such instances, we must help the student see the potential for the confessional episode becoming the first step toward confronting injustice, rather than an end in itself. Befriending the student means acknowledging the harm, then co-standing and supporting the learner.

An attitude of befriending is very much like the supporting role described by anthropologist Margaret Mead. An interviewer asked Mead, "What is the first sign you look for to tell you whether or not you have found an ancient civilization?" He expected her to cite a type of tool or article of clothing. Mead surprised him by answering: "a healed femur" (Rowell, 2006, p. 210). If someone broke a leg during ancient times, he could not hunt, fish, or escape enemies unless he had help from someone else. Thus, when an anthropologist unearthed a healed femur, it demonstrated that a civilization had existed for a community had helped that individual live long enough for the bone to heal. Compassion, according to Mead, is the first sign of civilization. We cannot heal students, but we can show compassion, befriend them, and encourage the additional relationships that they will need to mend.

Befriending is based on a gift economy, rather than market exchange. Laird suggests that befriending acknowledges our own unpaid debts to those teachers who acted as our companionate co-standers during our own periods of brokenness, poverty, or doubt. So, an attitude of befriending is integral to re-gifting confession because it recognizes both the importance of support and the need to "pay it forward," acknowledging our own unpaid debts that we can never repay. It contributes to the development of an inter-generational community of support. Lewis Hyde (1983) suggested, people are enlivened when we receive a gift that has circulated and "gone around the corner" to return to us in a gift economy (pp.16-20). How much more enlivening it is for a befriending teacher to see former students befriending a new generation of learners whose generosity is born from their own unpaid debts!

The fourth and fifth "attitudes" are inquiry and artistry, which must work hand in glove. In Foucault's late interviews he suggested that one must think with "attitude" by first problematizing an issue, a method that is primarily deconstructive, and then engaging in ethical inquiry, a constructive method in which the person recreates himself as a work of art. Therefore, in re-gifting confession teacher and learner inquire together in order to seek an artistic reinvention of self. An attitude of inquiry that is wrapped in an attitude of artistry is no cold and objective exercise. It means that learner and teacher, working together, try to perceive the learner's situation in all its richness, muddiness, chaos, and complexity. Refusing to fall into the trap of applying ready-made abstract principles, they contemplate solutions that others have used in similar circumstances, consider principles, and test theories, but they are responsible for investigating the context and considering the full range of possible consequences. They attempt to read the learner's situation in its temporal, evolving, embodied, and exigent contexts.

Equipped with knowledge learned through inquiry, they begin to imagine as many alternatives for action as possible. This artistic process is an improvisational drama with teacher and student considering deliberately and creatively how the various alternatives that they have imagined might play out. They envision the plot's twists and turns, the actors' inclinations, the rhetoric that the student will employ. Together they deliberate about, and decide upon, the best solutions, and then prepare the student for action through dramatic rehearsal.

This imaginative process is both moral and artistic. They can spin yarns and tell tall tales of whom the confessing learner wishes to become, how she wants to act, the kinds of

relationships she hopes to have, and the sort of community in which she wishes to live. She can fabricate her future without lying for pipe-dreams can be researched and castles in the sky can be investigated. These works of fiction may prophesy her life for the choices she makes and the decisions about what she will say and do, with whom, and under what circumstances, become the basis of transformation. She recreates herself in the image that she prefers, and in so doing she plays a part in refashioning her relationships and her world. Especially when our learner's confession is an attempt to bear witness, such deliberative, inventive, and interventive words and actions can confront inequality and challenge injustice. Unlike Foucault's stultifying concept of confession that subjectifies, normalizes, and reifies hegemonies, re-gifting confession offers opportunities for agency. As collaborators, teacher and learner can work together to release their power to the creative process using the brushes of disclosure and dialogue to recreate themselves as agents, artists, and community builders.

The term "re-gifting confession," then, is a double-*entendre*. The confessional process is gifted because it is freely given and received. It is also gifted because it requires that we use our talent and creativity to build up unpaid debts that can only be repaid by circulating in a gift economy where gifts "go around the corner" (Hyde, 1983, p.16.) Re-gifting confession is deliberate, humble, supportive, inquiry-based, and aesthetic; it is a process that is enlivening, rather than subjectifying; it throws open the door for artistic self-fashioning, rather than normalizing; it builds relationships and community through cultivating debts that cannot be repaid and engendering generosity.

Consequently, instead of reinforcing hegemonies, which Foucault's univocal rendering of confession deemed inevitable, re-gifting confession privileges shared story-making, knowledge construction, meaning-making, "healing," and artistry. Re-gifting confession exchanges the confessant's docility for the artist's virtuosity; the dark confession box for brightly pigmented palettes; the seal of silence for open colloquy; the hope of absolution for dramatic rehearsal. It awakens anesthetized imaginations in order to identify possible alternatives, ask why insufficiencies, inequities, and injustices exist, and artistically intervene as co-creators of the world in which we wish to live. It is a practice that can help reinvigorate its players by providing support to heal femurs and psyches and to point out potential artistic toeholds that provide opportunities for agency and artistic recreation.

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