

THE STUDENT-LEARNER GAP

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The author's sole ambition in the following presentation is to put on a sounder didactic basis a whole body of problems – a bold venture in itself, which hardly befits the allotted time and space. To put the whole thing in a nutshell, I have devised a title that is sure to perplex both the casual reader and the scrupulous student. The bringing together of the words “student” and “learner” will seem unnecessary and redundant, or, even more probably, will be regarded as a futile attempt to make a distinction undoubtedly devoid of sense. Indeed, it is no easy business to argue against such wise views, grounded as they are in common culture. But the building-up of any scientific theory very often requires that we move away from common sense and use old words as markers of new concepts. Unfortunately however, the problem considered here is not amenable to such a clear-cut delineation. The words “student” and “learner” should, at least provisionally, be taken at their face value. A student is one who studies; a learner, one who learns. Or, again, to stick to dictionary definitions, to study is to *use one's mind* to gain knowledge, whereas to learn is to (effectively) *gain knowledge*. However tenuous, this difference, not utterly foreign to common parlance I suppose, bears witness to the crux of the matter. While the pupil is indeed reported to study, the unbiassed observer will have good reason to wonder whether he or she does learn anything at all. Studying is a visible conduct, pertaining so to speak to the *public* sphere; whereas learning first and foremost belongs to the realm of *private* affairs and, for that reason, calls for a more complex investigation. In plainer language, studying is something one can see; learning, something one can only imagine, and may be willing to assess.

Let us now take a step further. Studying refers to the official rôle ascribed to the pupil in the teaching process: whenever a person comes to participate in such a process as a pupil, he or she will be made into a student. But an even subtler distinction should be posited at this point: I shall discriminate between “the student” and “the taught”. “The taught” would point to the pupil in so far as he is *subjected* to the “teaching treatment”; “the student” refers to the pupil as someone who reacts to this treatment, by taking some definite course of action. In mentioning the taught, we really denote the pupil; but, at the same time, however surreptitiously, we connote the teacher or, more abstractly, whatever condition or constraint is being imposed upon the pupil by the teacher. By contrast, in making mention of the student, we allude more overtly to his potential responsiveness, and actual response, to these conditions and constraints. It might be said, equivalently, that the taught is the object of the teacher's action, while the student is the subject *in action*. Or, to be a little more precise and to get closer to didactic theory proper: “the taught” refers to a determined *position* in the didactic order, and “the student” points to the rôle assigned by the didactic order to anyone in that position.

It would seem, then, that we are confronted with a plethora of terms which all revolve around one and the same “object”: the taught, the student, the learner – although the first term, I'm afraid, may sound to many like a barbarism. Still, some kind of order can be infused into this grouping of words. Indeed, they are easily seen to go in couples, as I have tried to suggest. On the one hand, the taught and the student refer to two distinct, though complementary, aspects of what I shall term the *didactic subject*: on the other hand, the student and the learner are

partial, though deeply intertwined, descriptions of the pupil as a *person*. The first couple materialises the logic of the didactic institution; the second extends this logic to reach out to him who, although a subject to the institutional order, remains partly foreign to it – the individual. A third couple might be considered, made up of the taught and the learner; but it is, if I may say so, an ill-matched couple, whose terms are too far apart. The gap between the taught and the learner is nothing other than the place that should be occupied by the student. In other words, studying is the missing link between teaching and learning.

From the point of view of the didactician however, studying is not the solution. It is where the problem lies. “The student” is the point at which the *didactic intent*, on the one side, and the *concrete individual’s biography*, on the other side, meet. It will be my main contention here that this *didactic encounter* is, in fact, very improbable. To teach is to generate a set of conditions thought to be propitious to learning; to study is to exploit those conditions in order to learn. Such is the two-step process that we, didacticians, are mostly concerned with. A moment’s thought then raises two associated problems. What is a “good” set of conditions? And what does it mean to “exploit” them in order to learn? A more thoughtful speculation will elicit still more, deeper questions. What is the “nature” of the conditions created? What is the stuff they are made of? How can we describe them? And, furthermore, how can the individual’s biography account for his or her ability to exploit them appropriately? What are the “capacities” – and of what kinds are they? – required to make the most of these conditions? These questions are, in my view, the heart of the matter, the points on which didactic research ought to center – if only to reduce the gap between research on teaching and research on learning.

One authorised kind of answer to this set of questions has drawn heavily on the concept of *the didactic contract*. What I have called the didactic institution presents itself to the potential student in the form of *situations*: in other words, the subject of the didactic institution meets only with fragments of the didactic order, and experiences it piecemeal. Didactic encounters are short-lived, transient, though recurring, *episodes*. Now, one must raise another major series of questions. How is the subject enabled to go – more or less successfully – through these situations? What provisions does the didactic order make in that respect? How is the student enabled to decipher the situation he or she is faced with? How does the didactic order handle him, so to speak, so that he can handle the situation efficiently from his own position? In essence, the answer to all these questions runs thus: in puzzling out the situation, the student will avail himself of the didactic contract, the terms of which are seldom explicitly expressed but supposedly known to everyone subjected to them – an old paradox of political theory as concerns the *social contract*. One should think of the didactic contract as a regulatory apparatus whose end is to control the proper managing of didactic situations, thus ensuring a relevant functioning of the overall didactic process. For sure, such an “answer” is very likely to leave many of us frustrated, because of its formal, unspecific character. Most scientific concepts however deserve much the same blame, in so far as they will by necessity display some degree of flexibility and vagueness, if they are to bear at all upon the matter that first evoked them. Only such qualities, in effect, can allow us to “get used” to them, and to deal with them, so that they in turn, if I dare say so, will “get used” to the several rôles they will be made to play within the theory. In other words, if they are to be effective as theoretical entities, they should remain open to change and adaptation and lend themselves to being “worked through” – a quality which contributes most to their significance and value as theoretical tools.

The didactic contract comments on the situation. For the teacher as well as for the taught, it operates – or should operate – as a guiding apparatus. To what extent can it be said to “control” the situation? The assertion is hardly understandable if one regards the teacher and the taught as exterior to the situation. It will become clearer if one recognises, as I shall advocate, that they should both be included in it. The didactic contract, then, hints at, and sometimes pinpoints, what either of them, or both, should proceed to do in, i.e. within, the given situation. Both of them, obviously, have their own autonomy; but within limits. I shall say that they are subsystems of a system, *the didactic system*, which is cohered by the didactic contract. What I have termed, up to this point, a situation can now be defined as a *state* of the didactic system. It is worthy of note, in this respect, that the concept of the didactic contract, bound up as it is with the concept of situation, cannot but draw a clear dividing line between the approach taken here and other, wide-spread, research problematics – in so far as it brings together the teacher and the taught as integrated parts of an indivisible whole to be studied as such.

The didactic system we have referred to nevertheless lacks one fundamental component, knowledge. Or, as I shall say, *taught knowledge*. Now, among many other things, the didactic contract designates the *stakes* of the current situation – and these stakes center on taught knowledge. To help the taught to interpret the situation, the didactic contract should make clear to him what the real stakes, in terms of taught knowledge, are. It should at the same time, in some way, dictate the line of action that he, as a student, should follow in connection with them. If this description is correct, the concept of the didactic contract entails one more line of demarcation. It should be crystal-clear indeed that what the student must get acquainted with, what he ought to master and “acquire” in a given situation cannot be reduced to the knowledge (being) taught. In the process of learning taught knowledge, some form of collateral learning has to take place. The student should recognise, for example, what the knowledge he is expected to learn really is. If only to master the knowledge that he is being taught, he must achieve some understanding and mastery of the situation as a whole.

Needless to say, the process of recognition involved therein remains open to *misrecognitions*. These may well, at least to a certain extent, be enacted in the interests of the student: any didactic situation whatever is a conflict situation within which the teacher, if only as a representative of the didactic order, and the taught contend with each other. Each of them tries to manipulate the terms of the contract being unfolded in the dynamics of the didactic interaction, and to lay down his own rules and standards – a crucial point which, however, we shall not pursue here. Be this as it may, access to taught knowledge thus presupposes some companion knowledge, which I call *didactic knowledge*. This body of knowledge, the mastery of which makes the taught into a fully-fledged *student*, is akin to taught knowledge but is not taught as such. It is generated in the functioning of the didactic institution; and its continuing production is – at least partially – instigated as well as controlled by the didactic contract of which, in its turn, it allows the continued production. In essence, didactic knowledge bears upon taught knowledge, but its “objects” are not only what I shall call *objects of taught knowledge*. Fundamentally, it is concerned with the various kinds of situations in which objects of (taught) knowledge may be embodied and with the way the student ought to deal with taught knowledge in those situations – the way he must behave according to the didactic institution, if he is to establish and display an *adequate* relation to it. Part of didactic knowledge is therefore made up of instructions concerning objects duly recognised by the didactic institution and which, for that reason, I call *institutional objects*. Furthermore, the instructions given describe the *official relations* the student, as such, ought to establish with them for the sake of adequacy. In its turn, what we have termed the didactic contract can now

be defined: it is the set of all these institutional objects and official relations. Let me add furthermore that an important subset of the set of institutional objects consists of pieces of formerly-taught knowledge – objects of knowledge which are no longer didactic stakes (they are officially supposed to be “known”) and are thereby relegated to didactic knowledge, by which process they are assigned the status of tools for action. (Every student is thus bound to handle any object of knowledge that he is supposed to learn in two distinct ways: firstly, as a didactic stake; secondly, when new didactic stakes have been laid and replace the old ones, as a didactic tool, in combination with many other such tools, to approach and master the newly introduced objects of knowledge.) More generally, didactic knowledge should provide the student with the (official) tools of his trade. Mastery of these tools is what makes (officially) the taught into an “adequate” student.

At this point however a major problem arises. Attainment of proficiency in that matter is by no means an easy-going process. Beyond the taught there lurks the person, subjected to so many other social institutions – the family, culture, and so forth –, not to mention his own past as a didactic subject. These and other *subjections*, as I call them, may well preclude, or at least hinder, achievement of adequacy. Being taught is an enforced, passive status (not state), imposed upon the person by society; being a student, in contrast, requires much more of the person. The gap between the taught and the student – due to the person’s inability either to grasp or to comply with the clauses of the didactic contract – is one major field of research in contemporary didactics and is likely to remain so for a very long time. But there is much more to it than that. The official relation to a given object of taught knowledge can be shown to be the outcome of a highly complex process of *local* optimisation. The *personal relation* to this object that the student establishes and maintains is, or should be, shaped according to the official relation. Now it frequently happens that, as soon as the object ceases to be taught knowledge and becomes a tool incorporated in didactic knowledge, adequacy as officially defined ceases to be “relevant”. In fact, it may turn out that adequacy, as formerly set forth through the didactic contract, be at variance with “relevance” or, as I shall say, with *idoneity*. Or, to put it the other way round, that idoneity be a far cry from adequacy. To continue to be a student, the taught should then work upon his own, formerly adequate, personal relation to the object. This, it is worthy of note, takes place within the didactic institution itself, the proper functioning of which necessitates a continuing adaptation to ever new requirements – official as well as indirect and implicit ones. Allow me to stress that all of these phenomena, brought to light by didactic analysis, can hardly be accounted for in terms of “pure cognition” and, to a great extent, even stand outside the province of that increasingly overworked notion, “metacognition”.

However replete it may be with institutional objects, the didactic world as we have depicted it still fails to provide the student with the tools that the learner needs. Besides institutional objects, there appear other, unrecorded objects which it is the task of didactic analysis to identify, and which play a central role in the pursuit of adequacy – in so far as lack of idoneity in the student’s relation to them would bar the way to adequacy. Such non-institutional *didactic objects* are objects which, if I may say so, go beyond the cognizance of the didactic contract – they are *missing* objects. To be numbered among them are all those entities for which didacticians have had to provide a name, a heavenly host comprising such prominent figures as the didactic contract and, for example, the various kinds of situation (of devolution, action, formulation, validation and so forth) that Guy Brousseau has disclosed to us. Let me add here as a further example, for any object O and student X , the (personal) relation of X to O , $R(X, O)$. While the didactic institution will judge X by the degree of adequacy of his relation $R(X, O)$, O being an institutional object of taught knowledge, the student X will have

to care for both his personal relation $R(X, O)$ and his relation to this relation, i.e. $R(X, R(X, O))$ – in so far as inadequacy of $R(X, O)$ might well be entrenched in some lack of idoneity of $R(X, R(X, O))$. More generally, the institutionally uncharted territory of *relevant* objects and relations of idoneity is left to the student to explore on his own. Many of the investigations and acquirements they presuppose and generate are kept out of public view and ignored by the institution. In fact, they belong to the learner's privacy, a sphere in which the person finds himself in charge of much more than the didactic contract adumbrates. The intrinsic pathologies –notably those rooted in the paradoxes that Guy Brousseau has so vividly underlined – closely associated with the didactic contract, on the one hand, and the crucial deficiencies of the didactic order, on the other band, leave a narrow way for the pupil's progress.