

¿HAY UN LUGAR PARA EL “DAR” EN LA ENSEÑANZA?

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Resumen

¿Podemos hablar del “dar” en la enseñanza?

El proceso del “don” tal como fue propuesto por Marcel Mauss¹ corresponde a un proceso en el cuál entre dar, recibir y devolver (que significa volver a dar, es decir, el contra-dar o *contredon* en francés) un objeto circula y aparece una expectativa más o menos larga (a menudo de carácter inconciente).

¿Qué ocurre entonces en este espacio de contra-don? Uno o varios objetos de saber/conocimiento circulan entre el profesor y los estudiantes. Pero, ¿qué es dado y qué es devuelto (contra-dado)? ¿Cuándo se devuelve? ¿Y quién lo hace? ¿Qué sucede con los retornos (contra-don) esperados por el profesor? ¿Y el de los de los estudiantes? Y sobretodo, ¿cuál es el impacto que ésto puede tener en el proceso educativo y en la eficacia del aprendizaje? Al final de cuentas, ¿qué lugar puede ocupar el “don” de Mauss en una situación de enseñanza?

En esta comunicación me esforzaré de mostrar el impacto y las consecuencias que el proceso del « don » de Mauss y las expectativas asociadas pueden tener sobre las situaciones de enseñanza.

Palabras clave: dar; enseñanza; devolver; expectativa; Marcel Mauss.

¹ MAUSS Marcel, 2003 (Primera edición 1950). Sociologie et Anthropologie. Paris : PUF.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR THE « GIFT » IN LEARNING PROCESSES?

Abstract

Can we talk about a « gift » in a learning process?

The process of “gift” proposed by Marcel Mauss² is the process defined by three actions: giving, receiving and returning (or return gift, *contredon* in French) where an object is transferred and a more or less expectation is established (sometimes quite unconscious).

What occurs during this giving back? One or several objects of knowledge are transferred between teachers and learners. But what is given and what is given back? When is it given and when is it given back? By whom? What could we tell about teachers’ and learner’s expectations? And more than that, what could be the impact of the “gift” and of expectations on the educative process and on the learner’s results? At the end, is there a place for the maussian “gift” in a learning situation?

In this paper I intent to show that both “the maussian gift” and “the associated expectations” could have some impacts and consequences on a learning situation.

Keywords: gift, learning process, to give back, expectation, Marcel Mauss.

² MAUSS Marcel, 2003 (1st edition 1950). *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Paris : PUF.

Is there a place for expectations and the “gift” in learning process?

My research, started several years ago, is about the “maussian gift” in Education, the process of giving-receiving-returning (or return gift, *contredon* in french”).

In 2008 I discovered the importance of expectations in this process and I started to interrogate and to observe them. From that time, I’ve been able to observe in my life and in learning experiences than expectations and there impacts were as important as the gift in our relationships. Then what could be the place of the gift in learning process? And in the mean time what could be the place of expectations in learning process?

But, what is the “maussian gift”? What is the process of gift?

The Gift

What is the “gift” proposed by Marcel Mauss in his *Essai sur le don* written in 1925?

From the observations of vernaculars tribes made by several ethnologists, Mauss highlighted three obligations which were the foundations of relationship: the obligation of giving, the obligation of receiving and the obligation of returning.

We give when we receive a request to give: an external request from somebody else, an institution or from traditions and social codes or an internal request coming from our own wish, our own desire. If we don’t do it, a tension (with others or with ourselves) could grow and could become a conflict (an external or an internal one). So, an obligation to give exists, even if we can decline it.

When we receive something which was given to us, we all know that it is difficult to say no, to decline what it is given to us. And we all know that if we’re doing it that could be the reason of a conflict or at the worse to the end of the relationship. So, an obligation to receive exists, even if we can decline the gift.

And when we receive something, we all know that one day we will return something to the one who give us, or maybe to somebody else, a third person. And if we don’t do it, if we never do it, we all know that a day that could damage the relationship. So, an obligation to return exists, even if we can refuse to return the gift, to give back.

Then, there is some obligations in the gift. But, we have to remember that obligation don’t mean

obligatory. “Gift is in the mean time free and obliged to somebody” (Caillé 2007, p 10). That’s why at each step of the process, a refusal can appear. “The possibility to decline the gift is engraved in the essence of gift, even if refusal must be polite” (Testart, 2007, p 125).

Some of yours can ask me “but what is the difference with exchange? We are giving, we are receiving and we are giving back.” That’s true, but there is some important difference, some fundamental ones.

When you are exchanging something, you are doing it after a formal or an informal trade. You know what you are giving, the value of what you are giving, when you are giving, to whom you are giving, when you will receive back, what would be giving back to you, his value (mostly equal to what you give) and when it will be given back to you. That’s how exchanges mostly work.

In the process of gift, there is no trade. You know what you are giving, to whom you are giving, when you are giving and you have your own estimation of the value of the object you give, that’s a symbolic value. You don’t know when you will receive back, you don’t know what would be return to you (the final value of the object is given by the one who receive and his return will be made according to his own estimation) and you’re not sure of who will give you in return.

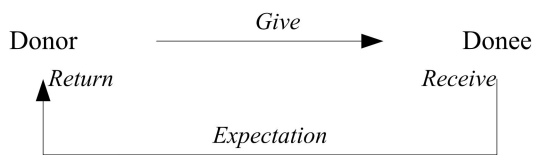
In the “gift” there is a lot of uncertainty but in exchange normally there is none.

In the “gift” you have some expectation who took place between the moment of giving and the moment of returning... between the object giving by the donor and the value he supposed he has and the object returned by the donee and the value expected by the donor. In exchange, there is no expectation expect the one to see the deal to be fulfil.

In the process of gift, A (the donor) gives to B (the donee) who became in debt, but a symbolic debt which is mostly unconscious. And when B returns the gift, he is giving back to A and became the donor, A becoming the donee and in the mean time becoming in debt with B. As we can see it, the process of gift, the “gift”, the “maussian gift”, is a recursive process who work in spiral and who could never end. But it also could be transferred. It could happened that B, as the donee, would returned to a third person, C (immediately or a long time later)³. And in doing it, he will create a

³ That could happened when the donor and the donee knows that the donee is not in a situation to return the gift. Like when a professor invite for lunch a student who didn’t have a lot of money, both knows that the student won’t be able to invite him in return, even if the professor will do it several time. But after his studies, when he will be older and will own his life, the ancient student could do the same with a youngest which would be in the same situation he was. In doing so, several years later, he will return the gift he receive to a third person.

new cycle of gift.



Then, the gift is a spiral process in which each turn work in five stages:

- the request which can come from somebody else, an institution or ourselves (coming from our own desire),
- the gift of an object given by the donor, the one who receive the request (the object could be a physical one or a non physical one),
- the receipt of the object given to the donee,
- the donor expectation of the return gift (mostly unconscious but sometime conscious),
- the return gift of the donee (who become the donor in turn) to the donor (who become the donee in turn), which is to give back, to give in turn.

And then, a new turn of gift can start, but at one condition: that the return gift expected was not disappointing.

So there is an expectation between the moment of giving/receiving and the one of returning/receiving. What can we say about it?

The expectation

The expectation is usually taking place between two moments:

- the beginning of an action,
- the result of this action.

In the process of gift, to give is the beginning of the action, and to receive the return gift is the result. Between those two moments, there is a conscious or unconscious uncertainty. The donor

can't know if he will have a return gift and when. And an empty space is springing from this uncertainty, an empty space which is going to be fill with our own imagination, with our own projections onto the result expected, the return gift expected.

Then, the expectation is an empty space feed with our make-believes, our imaginations and the projections we made. More we are feeding this space and more importance we are giving to it, strongest will be the expectation. And the stronger is the expectation, the harder will be to bear a little difference between the result expected and the result itself. And inevitably we could bad react. In the opposite, the less we will feed this empty space, less importance we will give to it, and the weakest will be the expectation. And in that case, it's easier to bear any difference between the result expected and the result itself.

In the process of gift, it's the same, even if most of this process and those expectations are unconscious, if we are not aware of what is happening inside us.

And we have to remember that a return gift is never neutral, it is always made in relation with the value which was given to a receive gift.

When you are receiving someone in a restaurant, you know that one day he will receive you in turn, that's part of the social codes. And usually, you are expecting him to receive you in a nice place and that he will be as pleasant as you. In one word, that the symbolic value will be better than yours or as well as yours. If it's inferior, you could be disappointed and then everything will depend on the quality of the bonds between you and him, which influence the strength of your expectations. You could accept this difference (with a little expectation) or you could decide that you won't receiving him again (with a strong expectation), which could eventually end the relationship. We can see there that the difference between the result expected - the return gift value expected - and the result itself - the return gift received - has an impact on what's going on after that. I'm sure you've already experience that in your life...

Thus, how we are expecting has an impact on what's going on. I've identified three type of situation that could occur: the result of the expectation (the return gift) is satisfying, is not satisfying or exceed the expectation. What does it occur then?

- If the return gift is satisfying, the donor will be pleased and the cycle of gift could carry on.

- If the return gift is not satisfying, the donor could be disappointed and maybe hurt. He could also decline the return gift. Whatever is the situation, there is a risk of tension and the further the value of the return gift will be, more there will be some risk of conflict with a possibility to see the cycle of gift to end.
- If the return gift exceed the expectation, the donor will surely be really happy and there is a possibility to intensify the relationship or to create some new one (in the case it's the beginning of a new cycle).

The impact of the expectations in the process of gift are far to be trivial.

Then, what expectations could have teachers and learners? And what is given in a learning process?

Teachers and Learners

In a learning process, the one who usually start to give is the teacher.

The teachers

What could give a teacher in his course?

- What do teacher give in the pedagogy he uses? It is different between the one who always teach in the same way, without any innovation, expecting that the learners adapt themselves to him and the one who teach in some different way, using several processes with sometime some innovations, adapting himself to the learners.
- What do teacher give from themselves in their way of “giving” a class? It is not the same when the teacher stay sited, reading his course and when he is moving, talking with the learners in a participative way. That's not the same energy which is given, it's not the same.
- What do teacher give in the critical remark they made? It's different between the one who always give some negative one and the one who try to be positive.
- What do teacher give in the kind of work they propose to the learners? We don't give the same thing when it's a lesson to learn, when it's some practice to made, a work to understand...
- What do teacher give in his way of correcting the learners works? Here again it is different

between the one who write a lot of critical remark and the one who write none except the usual judgment value (good, bad, etc.).

- The object of knowledge, is it given or passed on? If it is passed on, that's mean the learners receive it and if he receive it, he must be able to immediately pass on it to somebody else. And we all know that's not working like this. If that was, academic failure won't exist. When it is given, normally the learners receive it. But as we saw it, how did he receive it and what is he going to do with it? As a teacher, we have no idea of it, we have the obligation to live with this uncertainty, we like it or not.
- What do a teacher gives when he is specially working with a specific learner? But what do he gives when he doesn't respond to some learners who are on expectation of something?

Those seven objects of gift are not exhaustive. We can have some other objects according to the institutional context.

Those objects, when they are given, didn't create they some expectations with the teacher?

- What expectations came from the pedagogy he uses? The one who is only reading his lesson, does he expect a quiet and active attention from the learners or does he expect nothing? And the one who is creative, does he expect a better apprenticeship, a greater interest from the learners, a greater involvement, to be recognize for what he did,...?
- What does he expect from the learners when he give a lot of himself, talking with them, making them to participate? Is it a greater involvement, to see them participate or does he do it for his own pleasure,...?
- What does he expect from the critical remarks he gives? The progression of the learner, to see him staying in the role he put on him, his reaction,...?
- What does he expect when he gives a work to be done? Is it his own satisfaction in seeing that the learners "know", that they understand, to gratify his own ego regarding the number of learners who succeed,...?
- What does he expect when he correct the learners works? To see the progression of the learners, to give credit to them, to humiliate them, to give more credit to some of them and less credit to the others,...?
- And what does he expect regarding the knowledge he gives? To see it returned by the learners, to see the learners to learn in using it, to see them knowing exactly what he teach

them, to see them growing by the new knowledge they get, ...?

- What does he expect from the specific learners he works with? An evolution in their apprenticeship, a personal evolution, to see them going through their difficulties, ...?

Of course, there could be several expectations for each gift.

We just saw that for each “gift” he gives, the teachers can have several expectations. But what about the learners? What do they give and what are their expectations?

The learners

Each learner who is coming to a course is coming with some expectations which can be positive (pleasure, desire to learn, etc.), neutral (just to be there, etc.) or negative (no wish to learn, to disturb the course, etc.).

And according to their expectations, he will react differently to what he will receive, to what will be given to him.

Then, what are the expectations that learners could have when they came to a course?

Of course that could be different according to the learner’s age, their maturity and the institutional context. Older and more mature will be the learner, more expectations he will have.

So, for all ages we can find those kind of expectations with the learners:

- To learn and get new knowledges.
- To understand what is teaching to them.
- To not be bored during the lesson.
- To be interested by the subject.
- To be interested by the teacher.
- To be well mark.
- To be with friends and get laugh with them.
- To disturb the lesson.

And more specifically according to the age and the maturity:

- To get a subject for his diploma.
- To be good in the subject which have some credit for their parents and their family.
- To have some good or bad results to fit with the family look posed on them.
- To learn more and more on a subject they are passionate with.

We all know that the love of a subject is frequently determined by the teacher and how he gives his course, his way of being. And we can see it in most of the expectations above.

Then, what would give the teachers to answer to the learner's expectations? And how the learners will receive it?

It is difficult to answer to these questions. That will depend on the strength of the expectation of the learner, on the importance he gave to it. And this strength will depend on his temper, his family and cultural story, his experiences, his abilities and difficulties, his love or hate of the subject taught, his mood of the moment, etc.

But, we can have an idea of the return gift that a learner could give back to a teacher:

- His involvement in the pedagogic process proposed by the teacher.
- The way he participates in the works given by the teacher (which could be good or bad).
- His evolution or lack of interest when the teacher is specifically working with him.
- Some disorder and maybe some insults.
- His total lack of interest.
- the works given by the teacher which are symbolized by the evaluation, the notation.
- Some gratitude by some personal remarks.
- His support to the teacher.
- His critical of the course, of the teacher.

And again, this list is not exhaustive.

Impacts of gift and expectations on learners and their apprenticeship

We've been able to see that between teachers and learners, there is not only some goods objects which are given, they could also be bad. In French we have this expression which say that a gift

could be poisoned and in German, gift means gift and also poison.

To give is never a trivial act. To give involve the other, it could be violent, particularly with the debt it creates. Because the notion of debt could bring to the notion of fault (in German you have the same word for debt and fault: schuld).

Then, in a learning process, what a teacher give, how he will give it, and the importance and strength of his expectations will have some impacts on the learners, on his way to receive what is given to him and on his way to return, and then on his apprenticeship.

A learner in a lack of trust and which is on difficulties on his apprenticeship could regain some trust on himself when the teacher give him some credit by his remarks and how he act with him.

In giving some credit by his remark and in giving by the way he act with him, a teacher can give back some trust to a learner which is in lack of it. And trust in ourselves and our capabilities are essential for apprenticeship.

At the opposite, if a teacher is giving less credit to a learner, criticizing him badly, he could reinforce his lack of trust which could give more damage to his apprenticeship.

I remember in 1998, I was studying for a technological diploma as an adult. I remember one of my friend, Xavier, who came from the army and who have a degree in history. His weakness was the mathematics. We had two teachers for mathematics. One of them was very helpful with Xavier. She really wanted to see him succeeded. She was really involved in his teaching with him, taking time with him, always giving him some credit when he was right in an exercise. She gave a lot of her. Xavier didn't expect as a support. With her support, he works very hard, harder than if she was not there. That's was like a return gift to her, he had to succeed to show her she was right to support him. Later on, he told me that if she was not there, if we only have the other teacher (who was only coming to give his lesson, no more), he will never have his diploma. Now, he is a specialized engineer for France Telecom in France.

We can see there that the gift and the expectations can have a direct impact on the apprenticeship of the learners. An apprenticeship which would generally depend on the trust the learner will have on himself and his abilities.

Conclusion

The gift exists in learning process. There is several process of gift which exists and crosses themselves in the same learning situation. Some gift who creates some expectations more or less important. And stronger they will be, more impact they will have on the learning process, on the efficiency of the education, on the results of the learners.

For the learner, when the difference between his expectations and the return gifts he received is positive, that could create enthusiasm, happiness, more trust, better knowledge, involvement, etc. which could favour his apprenticeship. At the opposite, if the difference is negative, it could create disappointing, lack of credit, sadness, lack of trust, mistrust, hate, violence, conflict, giving up, etc. which could penalize the apprenticeship.

There is a total uncertainty about what learners will do with what is given to them, with what is teaching to them. To be aware of the process of gift in learning situation and his implications wouldn't it be a way, for teachers, to see and accept this uncertainty? In that way, wouldn't it be possible to lighten teacher's experiences and real life?

And won't it be interesting to talk about the "gift" and the expectations in teachers training?

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