

## **Planning-as-Burden, Planning-as-Gift: Shifting to Gift-Economy Approaches in Teaching and Learning**

Jennifer MacDonald & Kevin M. Leander

When young children make crafts and work with paper, crayons, glue, and sometimes feathers, they routinely offer such work as a gift to someone else. Even if the creation is not *for* another at the outset, the question of who to give it to often comes up. It is only until sometime later on, and most often in a relationship to school, that a child's work steps out of this gift economy and becomes more commodity-like. As a commodity, the work enters into exchange of being traded—for school credit, for grades, for recognition or the avoidance of punishment, for “free time,” and a whole host of other social goods. Over time, these schooled exchange relations become more distant from the child and teacher's awareness and become common sense to make schooling-qua-schooling possible. This logic persists even as the persistent and nagging problem of “motivation” continues to rise up, causing us to treat such issues as a quality of individual children or even teachers.

However, feeling resonance with Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) observation that “A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts” (p. 32) we wondered how we could take inspiration from what appears to be a natural, early inclination toward gift-giving. We asked ourselves if something could be recovered from that more innocent and joyful moment? What if we asked, along with Lewis Hyde (1979/2012), if an alternate economy is possible—one of *gifting*—alongside a more typical school economy? Andreas Weber (2017), writing of Hyde, speaks of a kind of “aliveness” in works that we do, as humans, that are not “subject to a dictate of performance or a compulsion to control” (p.183). What if we worked to recover this feeling of aliveness from the compulsion, control, and ego-focus that seem, in large measure, to be necessary qualities of commodity exchanges in school? Such a movement could be described as

a shift toward a *gift economy*. With gifting, abundance is normative, surplus is to be expected, and joy is found in generous movements toward the other.

In this chapter, we move to imagine schooling-as-gifting by engaging with a practice that we see as the bread and butter of teacher formation: unit planning. Specifically, we use the conceptual and embodied space of unit planning to visualize how a gift ecology might come about in teacher education. Planning together can provide moments for reflection, to gather collective energy, and to explore possibilities that cross the boundaries of what is habitually done. While we believe collaborative planning can potentially offer genuine moments of creativity and sharing, we see how such practices can also become burdens to our student-teachers, as they face institutional drives for fixed endpoints, struggle with group-work, or become anxious over grades. We hear some common feelings of *disenchantment* including the lack of time, anxiety, blame on other group members, narrow focus, and low energy, to name a few. Planning becomes a burden and these narratives commonly close off openings and invitations. Therefore, we wonder: What if our process of unit planning could be a process of *aliveness*? How might we invoke the reciprocity of the gift economy? In this manner, the purpose of this chapter is to imagine a shift in the ecology of planning and to explore alternative ways that might *breathe life* into the process.

### **Gifting, Posthuman Concepts, and Planning**

To create a shift in the processes of planning as burden, we feel it is important to move these processes more directly into the body—our own bodies, and by extension, those of our students. Planning, we feel, is too stuck in reason, in rationality. We want to find multiple entry points for planning as *gifting*—a process to encourage sharing, to embrace mystery and curiosity, and to evoke humility. To do so, we “assigned” ourselves the work of developing a unit plan for

our own students, or at least beginning the process of unit planning. In this process we conducted a small series of experiments to open up space for tensions and possibilities.

As our creative process progressed, a few guiding concepts from posthuman theory informed our inquiry. The first concept was understanding and feeling “desire” as a type of flow of energy that is pre-personal. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) described humans as “desiring machines” because humans are, above all else, producing and being produced. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is a productive energy that is subsequently organized either through its appropriation into social desires and expressions or that produces something unexpected and new. This constant movement of life’s energy, catching up materials, humans, words, concepts and other bodies into temporary “assemblages,” describes an approach to life that “moves with” openings and rearrangements rather than shutting them down.

Central to Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of desire is difference. Life – the constant movement of and through assemblages – produces difference: “[D]esire is production and life itself a desiring flow towards ever-proliferating differences ... a pre-personal and pre-individual germinal influx of intensity” (Fancy, 2010, p. 161). Difference, then, is our second key concept from posthuman theory, which, like “desire” has an everyday, folk meaning that is difficult to override—to think differently about. In this case, we do not mean “difference” as given in identity and recognized in either objects or subjects in a natural way (e.g., “the story is a different genre than the argument”). Rather, we mean “difference” or “differentiating” as differences in intensities (flows of energy) and differences produced *between* materials of all kinds coming into relationship. Thus, difference is always created in movement, in process, in proliferation. Difference is about what could happen—about what is unplanned and undesigned (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 2002).

Our third related concept of relevance for planning as gifting is “emergence.” From a posthuman way of being, “emergence” is a reorientation to time and activity as open, as not having fixed direction. (From a planning perspective, emergence may be seen as nearly an opposite in relation to time, but hence our experimentations that follow). The idea of emergence in Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is about reality constantly producing itself, creating new becomings (Grossberg, 2003, p. 2). For Deleuze and Guattari, there are no endpoints, only centers.

For us, desire, difference, and emergence are posthuman ways of rethinking and re-feeling the relationship of gifting to planning. How might we open up to what both of these terms mean through experimentation that involves energetic movement (desire), wild juxtapositions (difference-production), and stay with the process of possibility (emergence)? Therefore, in what follows, we share two experiments as an attempt to unsettle common ways of being and doing, and to also invite other voices and beings into our conversations. We present our experiences, improvising and body storming, not as a how-to guide but wish to offer an invitation to others as we speak in a wider conversation of aliveness.

Given our common interest in outdoor activities, and our shared feelings of loving natural over built institutional spaces, for our unit plan we posed this initial topic: *How might inside learning spaces hold the kinds of enchantment that we feel with outdoor places?*

### **Improvising Toward Emerging Questions (Kevin)**

In traditional practice, the central theme or question of the unit functions as a kind of motor to drive the feeling of student (and teacher) interest forward. If the question is interesting enough, we think, then answering it will also be interesting. But the problem with this logic is that it seals the question or theme off early on: everything we do after the moment of affirming

the question (typically, very early on) becomes answer, becomes material to be found, becomes burden. We remake school for ourselves (as teachers) as filling in a giant blank—a blank that we have created.

To move towards questioning as gifting, we engaged in a practice of dialogue called “yes-anding.” We borrow and adapt this practice from exercises for improvisational theater. “Yes-anding” is often an early type of activity that new improvisers will engage in as they learn to create improvised worlds between them. In our process, we simply gathered as a group of four (Jen and I recruited two of our colleagues—Candace and Barb) and had a yes-anding session. Each person in the group was asked to take a different “disciplinary perspective” —science (Kevin), physical education (Jen), visual arts (Barb), and music (Candace). In our activity, we kept the notion of “discipline” open and broad.

To engage in our yes-anding session, we stood up and faced one another. This embodied position is more active than seated in desks. Kevin led off: “Okay, our main question so far is: How could inside spaces for learning become enchanting like outside spaces?” The activity began like this:

Kevin: This idea of bringing the outside in has to do with thinking about the qualities of light. I’m curious about white and yellow light, and I would like to think more about how light affects me.

Barb: Yes, and from a watercolor perspective, so much about watercolor is about tone variation, light and shade, so . . . people who know how to do this might paint the same place at different times of the day.

Jen: Yes, and tones and colors of light might affect the movements of our bodies.

Notice that even at the very beginning of the interaction, that the yes-and structure is producing movement across the turns at talk. This is supported by the different disciplinary stances. From the original question, the line of connected thinking has moved across light qualities—effect of light qualities—tone variation in watercolor—same place at different times of day—light tones and colors affect on bodies. The movement of ideas across the group is getting broader at moments already and also focusing in at times (Jen’s last thought in this sequence can be seen as a subtopic of Kevin’s opening thought).

Barb had to listen very carefully to Kevin’s contribution in order to offer hers. This is difficult for many students at the outset because they are most used to topical chaining in classroom responses—where seven hands shoot up at once to respond to a teacher’s question and not to the person who spoke immediately previously. Close listening, in this sense, is a radically new practice of gift-like exchanges. Notice also that Barb’s contribution and then Jen’s comes with a bit of ritual: “Yes, and . . .” An important idea here is that Barb and Jen’s contributions do not replace or exclude Kevin’s gift in any way: they are rather added onto it. Together, the two gifts, and all of those following, become a connective web of gift-giving, which itself makes up a new whole—the whole of the interaction becomes of gift of ideas.

Due to bad habits of burden learned over many years, there are a few traps to be aware of in this practice. The first trap is to offer a response (as gift) that doesn’t relate to the one before it. You must attend to the gift—you must listen to the gift carefully. Note, for instance, the following exchange. Kevin is responding to Barb’s offer that “many great artists attempted to paint what they heard in music”:

Kevin: Yes, and you're talking kind of about this relationship of the senses, and from a scientific perspective, I'm interested in this idea of synaesthesia, sensing one sense with respect to another—I don't know how that relates to this inside/outside relation

Jen: Yes, and I wonder how our senses of the body—indoor or outdoor—impacts, again, how we move or just how we are in space, and I am thinking about sound, and how sound in my athletes makes them move faster or more efficiently, or with more energy and with more life.

While Jen's response here uses the "yes-and" structure, the topic of her contribution really doesn't have much to do with the traversal of sensations in synaesthesia. Rather, it has more to do with the idea of sound affecting embodied movement, a topic she had brought up earlier in the interaction. This kind of return to one's own topic or commitment is very common for students who are learning to engage in yes-anding.

A second trap is to refuse the gift, responding with something like "no, but . . ." or a variation of that thought. In this case, you take up an either/or stance. You must choose between your group member's idea or yours—there is not space for both. The idea becomes a burden, and perhaps even your partner becomes a burden. Students often respond that they would rather just do work on their own rather than in a group; chances are these students have rarely experienced the idea of arriving at something much bigger than themselves.

The third trap is that you respond to the gift by making a demand. The most familiar way to make a demand is to ask a question. So, your partner says, "I am really interested in the problem of fake news and how there is too much bad information out there," and you say, "Where have you seen fake news?" Your partner now has a burden—and it's *your* created burden, rather than hers. How could you instead bring a gift or offer with "yes, and . . ."

Our session of yes-anding in relation to our initial question lasted just a short time, yet was incredibly generative. Following is a partial list of the ideas that emerged in the process.

- ❖ Painters who paint the same place different times of day, like Monet or Manet and the cathedral at Rouen
- ❖ How light might affect movements of our bodies
- ❖ Music and how certain tones and the clustering produce feelings of lightness.
- ❖ How does the body and our perception of our different surroundings impact how we move and our different space?
- ❖ How music is all around us.
- ❖ The moving of chairs and pencil sharpeners might make us feel light or heavy and how all of that works with the sound of a classroom.
- ❖ The sound of gravity on our bodies. and how it's on a subconscious level, and how it impacts on how we move through sport.
- ❖ Thinking about silence, and how its generative, and what happens as a teacher or music teacher, and how it offers permission for new compositions.
- ❖ Wondering if silence exists
- ❖ Rhythms and how they are biological and natural but also technical—the science of rhythm.
- ❖ What are the natural rhythms of music around us?

You will probably notice how the ideas in this reference the different disciplinary perspectives we took up. Yet, as much as that happened, the disciplinary boundaries and binaries began to break down, and sometimes in obvious ways. The gifts or offers in the interaction were no longer separate items as they came together:

Candace: So I'm thinking that what you're saying as a science person, and I'm thinking about music, is that we broke that binary or dichotomy, by saying that there's this science, and these sounds of nature, in our bodies—just hearing that together is how science, and nature, and music, and rhythm work together—what are the natural rhythms and music, you know, that are getting produced around us?

This chain of thoughts—a gift of idea movement across divergent and convergent ways of thinking—opens up our original question and breathed life into the demand of a group topic or question. Notice, however, that we arrived at some new questions not by being asked a entire series of new questions by our partners in the circle (a more conventional schooled practice) but by being given words, ideas, images, resources, and associations that are chained together in the act of listening, receiving, offering.

### **Body-Storming: Being Moved by Multiplicities of Place (Jennifer)**

Unit planning is habitually negotiated in static settings. Tables, chairs, and fluorescent lighting, all accompany a standard template used to map the coming hours, days, weeks, or months. A common collaborative practice Kevin and I notice in planning is to *brainstorm* strategic methods to deliver content, engage students, and how students will demonstrate their learning. Typically, in the first stage of a brainstorming session, *anything goes*; ideas around a topic are generated and recorded without critique. Once this initial expression of ideas is complete the mess is *cleaned-up*, so to speak, as group members deliberate options and move forward. While this mode of planning may provide a sense of order and logic, we see it also assuming a one size fits all map, adaptable for all places and all people, and thus, overlooks the ecological gifts that surround, infuse, and sustain life in a particular place.

To shift into planning as a form of gifting, we wish to go beyond human-centeredness of learning to include the web of more-than-human relations that we find ourselves within. Places offer a series of interwoven gifts and relationships such as seasonal changes, human and more-than-human life, rhythms and patterns, connections, and stories (Massey, 2005). Reflecting on our initial inquiry, then, to bring the vivacity of the outdoor world into the indoor space, our second experiment led us to the unconditional gifts within our ecological surroundings. To engage with these gifts, we wanted to re-balance the body as a source of desire and emergence (over solely focusing on a cognitive way of knowing). To do so, we ventured outdoors and rested on a small area of grass as our site for inquiry. Surrounded by footpaths, buildings, large trees and low growing shrubs we noticed people travelling by in a hurried way as other beings (such as squirrels, magpies, crows, rabbits and a variety of insects) went about their daily business. In this moment, everything between the afternoon sky and the ground we were sitting upon became an assemblage for us to be present with.

We began by questioning how enchantment is generated with these spaces and returned to the common process of *brainstorming* (as generative approach for inquiry). Metaphorically, as an aside, we pondered other uses of *storming* in relation to natural world and the unpredictability of natural phenomena—such as, snow, lightning, wind, rain, thunder, etc. We saw how these occurrences often bring community together by way of sharing resources or stories of common experience. However, in the language of “brainstorming,” we note that the *brain* is doing all the work—no *body* is present, active, or intra-active. So then, we came to consider the idea of *body-storm* to help us attend to the multiple voices, positions, and possibilities surrounding us.

This first required us to become present to our bodies and to feel the world by appreciate the gifts of our senses. We started to recognize the series of relationships we were already

entangled in. We lingered on the ground listening, feeling, and observing. There were moments of silence between us and then conversation would *emerge* again. This seemed to bring place and connection *alive* as a text of desire. I paid attention to what I was sensing in the moment and told Kevin how I enjoyed the earthy smell of the leaves on the ground around us. I explained how the leaves hold memory for me. First, was the essence of home and playing outside during my childhood (a distinctive smell for this season) and this led us to a wider consideration of life cycle of leaves. In the spring I feel joyful as the trees come to life after a long winter, and now, on this autumn afternoon, the leaves were gifting nutrients and minerals to the ground. Trees sustain life and give unconditionally. These offerings, we pondered, are often taken for granted. Our attention was led to the multiple bird songs coming from high in the trees and nearby shrubs. A language we do not understand, yet when given time and care, becomes rich in meaning.

Looking up, the sky offered another narrative. We talked about the clouds and the story they offered us. I took note of the thin fibered cirrus clouds at high altitude; an indication of fair weather for several days. As we talked about the sky, and I shared some knowledge from my work as an outdoor educator, we both suddenly commented on the warmth we were enjoying. From here, the theme of the sun—the gifts of light and warmth—surfaced as a source of enchantment. Weber (2017) explains how both are gifts: “Light is the epitome of that which is given free of charge and without ulterior motives. It is also derived from an act that is completely void of intention: The sun bestows its warmth and wastes itself in the process” (p. 181). As we sat blissfully in the autumn afternoon sun, I felt a debt of gratitude.

As I reflect on our experience together, I understand that the earthy-smell reminding me of my childhood, the generative conversation of the life cycles, hearing more-than-human languages, and embracing light and warmth, were all expanding my understanding of this

particular place and time. Yet these are only the small pieces of my experience that are accessible on the surface. I see that Kevin and I were trying to find something that is layered and highly subjective to get at. We both commented on the gift of being with our bodies in ways that allowed us to recognize and receive. With this, we felt resonance with Weber (2017), who states: “Many people who live in balance with the natural world feel that they receive gifts from it, and also feel prompted to give to it” (p.183). Ultimately then, in the spirit of reciprocity, we then discussed how we give back to places that give to us. The unconditional offerings of the more-than-human inspire both the feeling of generosity we desire for our indoor space and signal deep considerations of cyclicity to overcome the common linear fashion of unit planning with a rush to the pragmatics of the end-goal.

The practice of body-storming attunes us to the animacy of our inquiry in a deeply felt way. Instead of staying in our heads, we attempt to shift focus to our bodies. This process brings us into contact with materials that often go unnoticed in our everyday experiences (the texture of the grass, the sounds of the birds, the joys of conversation, the feeling of lightness while breathing in the fresh air and enjoyed the sun’s embrace on our skin). At the same time, this practice comes with a sense of humility—affirmation that we are a small part of a larger web of relations. It is important to note that this was an unhurried process that required us to be more quiet and reflective than the typical brainstorm event characterized by group members spontaneously contributing ideas. We were called to listen and feel deeply to consider the *connections not seen*. While at times the practice seemed abstract, it points to the need to go beyond the surface level of knowing your way around. Places are highly integrated and do not disclose themselves straight away. Acquiring ecological insight through the body requires time and affective-laden ways of knowing to uncover mysteries, and even then, the mystery will likely

come with multiple meanings. By being attentive to multiple-beings that co-exist with us and discussing what emerges, can allow new possibilities to be brought life.

### **Planning-as-Gifting: Improvising and Body-Storming**

The process of gifting is participatory, personal, and dynamic. Largely, gifting requires us to give something of ourselves and allows us to receive something else—not always readily apparent—in return. Paying attention to the idea of the gift, as we see it, is a mode of promoting life in typical schooled conventions that generally centre human exceptionalism and commodity exchange. The two experiments from our collaboration—improvising and bodystorming—guide us to attune to the unique contributions of each other and all living entities in the places where we live and gather. A common theme that emerged through our experiments was the need to listen carefully (with our entire bodies) in order to arrive at a new whole. This listening exposed vibrancy allowing us to move with openings as they emerged.

Reflecting on our work with pre-service teachers we imagine how our experiments might help generate spaces that build comfort following ambiguous leads. Both activities are nuanced in ways that pay attention and respond to the layered and connective webs of human and more-than-human gift giving, they promote fluidity and unfold in ways that require a certain level of vulnerability and trust. This level of openness pushes back against the often positivist mainstream perspectives of teaching and learning and might be difficult for beginners. Regardless, we see this work as necessary to bring a sense of aliveness to the process of teacher formation, and subsequently, to teaching and learning at all levels. From our perspectives, to live, teach, and learn in a world made of gifts supports living in ways honours enchantment (Bennett, 2001), generates kindness and tolerance, and promotes an ethic of responsibility to all that gives life.

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*While attending to gifts of place in this chapter, we acknowledged our gathering on the traditional territory of the Treaty 7 people, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.*

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Gift-giving is a dynamic practice that encourages sharing, embraces mystery, and evokes humility. Applying posthuman concepts of *desire*, *difference*, and *emergence*, we re-think and re-feel typical processes of unit planning to imagine approaches to promote schooling as a gift economy. In this spirit, some considerations:

- What are my gifts? What are the gifts of my discipline? What contributions are these gifts making to the collaboration? How am I listening to and giving life to the gifts of others?
- How will the unit plan come alive? Does the central question promote reciprocity? How do I honour other questions which emerge?
- What wisdom does my body hold? How can I give more of my whole self? How can my wholeness generate teaching and learning possibilities?
- What ecological offerings surround, infuse, and sustain life in this particular place? What goes unnoticed in my everyday life? How can I pay attention and give back to the often taken-for-granted gifts of life with(in) my learning space?