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The Nature of the Gift: Accountability and the Professor-Student Relationship

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Abstract

In this paper I introduce the theory of gift giving as a possible means to reconcile the contradictions inherent in accountability measures of “faculty productivity” in the American university. In this paper I sketch the theory of gift economies to show how, given the historical ideals that characterize the faculty-student relationship, a theory of gift giving could help us better judge the labor of the faculty. I suggest that it is the relational character of teaching that frustrates accountability measures and that perhaps if viewed as a gift economy—and in particular an economy with “reproductive” ends—we could better grasp the effectiveness of these relationships.
As the demand for accountability in American higher education grows, countless efforts have been put forth by individual institutions and government policy boards to assess the performance of higher education, in particular the productivity of the faculty. Largely motivated by public demand for standards and accountability given tuition increases, state governments, accreditation agencies and universities have developed strategies and programs to evaluate the effect of the faculty on students both in and outside of the college classroom. In these efforts, however, the nature of the faculty-undergraduate student relationship in the university and its perceived relevance for undergraduate learning has been relatively free of scrutiny. There has been no deliberate theoretical (or empirical examination) conducted on the nature of the professor-student relationship, and more precisely, no attempt has been made to ascertain the relationship’s bearing on effective undergraduate learning despite accountability claims.¹

Accountability efforts in both the public and private university sectors have signaled a desire to understand, assess and improve this unique relationship culturally rooted in the privileging of cognitive autonomy and authority. The professor-student relationship in the university has been molded by beliefs about the trustworthiness of the expert and his knowledge, thus assigning credibility and trustworthiness to the expert, while simultaneously and definitively informing the hierarchy that typifies the professor-student relationship. The professor-student relationship is one in which actors enter with assumptions about credibility and authority. But what comprises those assumptions and how those assumptions manifest themselves in effective learning continues to go unexplored.
This paper will present a conceptual account of the professor-student relationship using philosophical, anthropological, sociological and educational literature on gift giving and exchange, cognitive authority, friendship, and pedagogy. Specifically, this paper will focus on the scholarship on gift giving as a novel means to assess the nature of the professor-student relationship in undergraduate teaching and learning. It is my supposition that if we were to understand this relationship as one functioning in a “gift economy”—one in which knowledge circulates as a consequence of a unique social bond—then we can not hold the professor-student relationship to accountability measures more appropriate to a “market economy” where commodities are contractually exchanged. Instead, to view the student-faculty relationship as a gift economy may offer us a new means of understanding and documenting (or “accounting for”) our professional academic responsibilities.

I have identified as relevant to this query several themes appraised in the social sciences literature. In what follows I first discuss the “gift economy” and the scholarship on gift giving as a relational experience. Then, I discuss themes in the social science and philosophical literature (in particular the literature on feminist pedagogy and the nature of friendship) and reason their significance and relevance to this theoretical paper’s proposition.

*Gift giving and exchange*

The anthropological and sociological literature casts gift giving as “the cement of social relationships” (Komter, 1996, p.1) and makes clear the distinction between the giving of gifts and the economies of exchange that are bound by contractual and/or fiduciary obligation. As social relationships, gift economies reflect a shared culture whose underlying
rules correlate with ideas about generosity and reciprocity. So I pose the question, “Is the professor-student relationship, like with Malinowski’s Trobriand Islanders, or Mauss’ “archaic” societies, or Stathern’s Melanesians representative of a social act in which the gift (ideas and knowledge) is an economy?” Though the relationship of giver-recipient is marked by social inequality, is this particular gift economy “need-oriented rather than profit-oriented” (Vaughan, 1997, p. 30) and thus better understood as a feminized economy in some ways paradoxical to current accountability principles?

Sociological and psychological literature on relationships and human communication, key anthropological and philosophical texts define the gift giving, the nature of gifts and the participating actors, and their economies. Beginning with Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (1922) and then later in Marcel Mauss’ *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1924), the anthropological view has suggested that reciprocity, gratitude and generosity are principles that define and characterize the relationships bound by the act(s) of giving gifts. These principles will configure the meaning of “teacher” and “student” in ways that will suggest that there is a “psychology” of identity that is important (Schwartz, 1967), that the meaning of gifts lie in their symbolic communication (Levi-Strauss, 1949), and that giving, because it necessarily involves a consideration of inter-relational power, must be viewed as a matter of morality (Simmel, 1950). Berking’s *Sociology of Gift* (1999) revises gift theories to reflect not the rituals of archaic groups or clans but rather the “cultural frameworks and situational contexts (in short, social structures of meaning” (4) that characterize modern life. When viewed through the feminist perspective of Strathern (1988), we begin to see how gender—perhaps the feminine character of generosity—scripts this relationship as
contradictory to the language and spirit of present day accountability appraisals. Taken together, these treatises on gift giving comprise the social science and philosophical landscape onto which I map the professor-student relationship.

**What are gifts?**

From the perspective of the poet, the gift one gives to another is “a portion of thyself”, in fact, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, this is the “only” gift (2004/1844). One’s “biography is conveyed” in the gift, the giver’s “life and talent” must embody the gift in order for it to truly be a gift. And so, in Emerson’s view,

the poet brings his poem; the shepherd his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing.

The gift, then, symbolically contains and carries something that identifies the giver and further, it bears and transmits something interpersonal and as a consequence is free of commodification. A reflection of the interconnectedness of the giver and receiver, the gift holds the identity of the giver and is thus very personal, almost “magical” (Mauss, 1990/1950). As Marcel Mauss observed, something of the person giving the gift “moves” from the giver to the gift, so much so that the gift no longer is just its objective concreteness. Instead, things given become more than just “things”; they embody something of the giver and in doing so, have the power to move and circulate these qualities—or in the case of the faculty, ideas as gifts circulate in a knowledge economy. Like systems of potlatch among America’s northwest native cultures, the giving of something through ritual is personal in that it invokes both the nature of the giver and the recipient (Wells, 1998). Thus, in many tribal communities, and as I suggest occurs in the faculty-
student learning relationship, the giving of gifts is “an erotic commerce, joining self and other” (Hyde, 1983, p.163).

That the gift has an erotic quality should not unnerve us. This is not the prurient manifestation of the “erotic” that we have in post modernity identified as inappropriate and unethical in student-faculty relationships. Let me also note that the moral dimension of gift giving as articulated by Simmel (1950) correctly describes the ethics of the profession regarding the power imbalance between student and professor. Rather, here the rendering of eros is in its classical Platonic connotation; it is to love not the individual as such but rather the element of beauty that he possesses. In this view, the ideal beauty is reflected in particular images of beauty that can reside in such things as ideas. In the case of the professor-student relationship, the “erotic commerce” that is gift giving reflects the beauty that exists in ideas, and more importantly, in the individual’s pursuit of knowledge. It is not the giver (the professor) himself who is loved but rather the gift—the ideas and their intended aim, knowing. Nevertheless, these gifts carry with them the spirit of their “beauty”, the essence of the giver. Ideas, as gifts, then, carry the marks or the “beauty” of the giver and consequently bond the recipient to the giver in erotic commerce. In Mauss’ (1990/1950) anthropological observations, the Platonic “beauty” of the gift is the “hau” or the “spirit of things” given. Gifts “possess a kind of individuality” that constructs the giving relationship as one of alliance and community—a relationship in which we accept communion (pps.11-12).

This can be read or understood as interdependence between actors that evokes our present day cultural understanding of mentorship, apprenticeship, and the teacher-learner dyad. In such giving relationships, Berking (1999) argues that there is “presentation of
self” and some recognition of the identity of the “other”, and that the gift—the transmis-
sion of ideas, knowledge, and expertise—makes known the distinctiveness of the rela-
tionship and its actors (p. 5). This gift commerce is a form of “generosity” that unlike
traditional Christian (and especially Catholic) understanding of “caritas”, is a relationship
in which the giver receives the other’s “specificity”, thus acknowledging her subjectivity
(Coles, 1991, pps. 104-106). This, according to Robert Coles (1997) is “real giving”
(p.104) and in my view, it is a gift commerce guided by eros. Gifts make connections
between the actors, erasing boundaries through “eros-trade” (Hyde, 1983, p. 61).

In the West, all theories of gift giving submit that the most basic and fundamental
property of the gift is that the gift always moves and is always to be given away. Gifts
move across the relationship without the expectation of a return gift. Rather, the gift is
“consumed” by the recipient but it is consumption not in the sense that the gift is ex-
hausted or expended. Instead, the recipient eventually gives the gift away and she con-
tinues the commerce of giving (Berking, 1999; Mauss 1990/1950; Hyde, 1983; Malinow-
ski, 1970/1922). Gifts transmit and are themselves transmitted. Students accept gifts or
the teachings and ideas of the faculty and in doing so are changed in some way. This is
the time of “gratitude”, the time when students learn and are only then able to pass the
gift along. The gift (ideas or knowledge) moves only when the student has the power to
give the gift away, and it is at this moment when we can say that the gift has transformed
the recipient—that the faculty’s ideas or knowledge—have changed the student in some
way. “Readiness” marks both the acceptance of the gift and the gratitude felt while pre-
paring for its circulation. Students receive the gift of knowledge and unconsciously ready
themselves for the transformation that comes with the gift (new ideas, new thinking). But
they cannot recirculate the gift until they have the power (learning) to pass it along. What new ways of thinking or assessing the world I pass onto or give my students will continue beyond our relationship, but its circulation is in the hands of the student.

The motion inherent to the gift indicates that gift giving is a relationship that may not be consonant with the language and spirit of obligation or contractual exchange—the trademark of accountability directives. That is, if the gift moves, it cannot be a static property that can be formally or contractually exchanged between actors. Gifts move because they are social bonds between self and other, between teacher and student. Gifts, or ideas and knowledge, because they are by nature erotic and relational, cannot be property to be sold or exchanged contractually. We do not “give” ourselves in a formal transaction or commodity exchange because in such a transaction, there is no erotic bond, no communion or “feeling-bond” between the giver and the recipient (Hyde, 1983, p. 56). The gift, when viewed as a property or commodity to be exchanged under the obligations of contractual dictate, ceases to be a gift. It ceases to be Mauss’ “social phenomenon;” it ceases to be relational. In fact, a recompense or reciprocal gift is never talked about or intentionally negotiated at the time that the gift is given. If there is “reciprocity” it is not immediate and fixed. Rather, the expectation is that the gift will live on or continue; that ideas or knowledge will be carried into other relations and continue their circulation (Levi-Strauss, 1957/1949).

In light of the proposition that the professor-student relationship is one of gift giving, that the gift moves and that it is not “property” to be sold or contractually acquired, is a critical condition. For if we are to say that gifts can be “bought” as commodities are purchased or as properties are “sold”, then we render the faculty-student relationship to
be absent the idiosyncratic “essence” or “hau” that personalizes the gift. In this way we would be talking about an economic and legal relationship that sheds the erotic, that loses the individual’s “beauty”, or more to the point, is without the emotional quality that makes it social, and not impersonally transactional. If we think about what makes “personal” the gift, it is the identity of the giver and the recipient, and not the dispassionate, nonsubjective, negotiated terms of a formal contract. Despite the fact that contractual obligations may mimic the gift economy by formalizing the union of individuals for some purposeful exchange (Hyde, 1983), unions borne of contractual obligations lack the personal. What matters in contractual exchange is the object or thing to be sold or bought, and not the sympathetic commune borne of relations.

When we view ideas or knowledge as gifts, and professor and student as actors engaged in gift commerce, we assume and make note of the idiosyncratic identifications made by the transmitter of the ideas (the faculty), and presuppose that the recipient (the student) takes the gift without true obligation. Imagine, then, that the faculty member is involved in multiple actualizations of the gift economy—she has more than one student in a course, more than one advisee, more than one doctoral apprentice. Imagine that she is engaged in an economy or praxis of giving. Can the giving be standardized? Can all her gifts be the same to each of her students? And further, can her colleagues each give to each of their students in the exactly same way? How does our accounting of the gifts tally the idiosyncratic? Is the gift economy of faculty and students not subject to the objective requirements of contractual exchange—that things are emotionally alienable?

*University teaching and learning as gift economy?*
In *Academic Duty* (1997), the former president of Stanford University, David Kennedy, delineates the responsibilities of the American university and in particular, its primary academic actors, the faculty, by invoking albeit unknowingly the gift metaphor. He writes that

The university is an institution that exists to advance the culture, both by acquiring new knowledge and by disseminating received knowledge in ways that inspire young people to use it—both creatively and constructively. In that way professors are agents for making society better than it was, generation by generation. (68)

By referring to the faculty as “agents”, Kennedy evokes a gift economy as the paradigm of faculty responsibility. Kennedy’s view is that as the means to higher education’s aims, the faculty’s most important duty (and I note here that he does not use the term “obligation”) is to gift ideas and knowledge to students who in turn circulate the gift for the public good. The faculty, according to Kennedy’s portrayal, is a profession functioning in a gift economy because its members have a “calling in which the central purpose is generational improvement” (p.68). The “responsibility” that is at the “very core” of the faculty’s “academic duty” (p.58) is, in fact, to give the gift and to do so despite imbalances of power, and in the face of pressures from external forces and institutional decision making and evolution.

Kennedy is representative of the many calls for higher education reform in the past decade and a half. Rosovsky (1990), Boyer (1990) and Massey & Zemsky (1992) are also illustrative of the treatises on the university’s public mission in the late 20th century at the core of which is a desire to re-assert and further articulate the university’s “social contract” relative to the responsibilities of the academic profession. In these ac-
counts, as in David Kennedy’s, the role of the faculty is a central consideration because as the sum and substance of the university, their performances must be measured and assessed in order to determine the extent to which they fulfill their “obligations” to social contract—or understood differently, the extent to which they “give”.

In the last decade of the 20th century many set out to measure the faculty’s gift by developing rubric for “faculty productivity.” Though university research practices and administrative policies are scrutinized in an effort to hold institutions accountable to the public, “faculty productivity” was is seen by state policy makers and granting agencies as the most salient feature in assessing the extent to which the university fulfills and satisfies the conditions of its social contract. Middaugh (2001) suggests that the best indicators of faculty productivity result from an analysis of both faculty “efficiency” and the “quality” of their production, and set out to develop benchmarks for “faculty productivity”. According to Middaugh, with such a rubric, the professorate and the university can better articulate to public and governing agents “not only how much faculty are teaching…but how well they are doing [it]” (Preface).

These aforementioned policies and expositions on “faculty productivity” struggle with what appears to be the inevitable Gordian knot: How does one quantify that which is relational and consequently distinctive, variable and unpredictable? How can institutions enumerate and compute that which is not the “production” of “obligation” but rather the “reproduction” of the “gift”? Measures of “faculty productivity” include tallies of students taught in classes, the number of courses taught, the number of credit hours generated, the number of publications and research grant monies attained, even the number of undergraduate advissees and graduate dissertations. But even those institutional and state
guidelines that seek to evaluating “faculty productivity” by measuring how and to what extent faculty are effective in supporting student learning, are unable to itemize that which is essentially incapable of being counted: an erotic relationship, a gift economy.

It is not my aim in this paper the re-examine or put right the stipulations asserted in state policy directives and expositions like Middaugh (2001). Instead, my aim is to identify the source of the tension or the incompatibility between measures of “faculty productivity” and the cardinal purpose of the faculty, and to suggest a theoretical view to more effectively capture of the teaching role of the faculty.

Gift theory begins with the simultaneously obvious and obscure: the fact of association. Teaching, whether in the classroom or during office hours, is a relational act, a fact that goes unnamed in “faculty productivity” estimations. At best, our view of the faculty-student relationship in these evaluations remains vague, exclusive of those transgressions of faculty power that breach the ethical threshold of the profession and culture (e.g. sexual harassment, racial bias). In university course evaluations the relationship between students and professors is overlooked focusing instead on an assessment of information conveyed and even the physical conditions of the classroom. The relational dimensions of good teaching are not captured in these instruments and other components of “faculty productivity” assessments and rightly so. Assessments of relationships require much more reflection and deliberation than can be reasonably expected given the methodological conditions, i.e. often large enrollments, narrowly framed Likert scale items, and the little amount of time dedicated to completion. Student exit interviews and those conducted for the purposes of a professor’s promotion often mimic the course evaluations, though in these interviews we are able to see attempts to capture the heart of the
matter, the student’s assessment of their relationship with the faculty and its impact on their learning. The point here is that in our efforts to catalog and itemize all that faculty do, and in particular what and how they convey knowledge to students, we most often miss the fundamental and vital: the teaching relationship.

We fail to see the faculty-student relationship in these and other “faculty productivity” determinations in large part because our view is framed by logic (perhaps symbolic) and logos that cannot simply integrate the relational, or more precisely, the erotic. “Faculty productivity” measures are a logos not of association or erotic communication; rather these assessments reflect a logic of market economies emblematic of what we now term “the corporatization of the university” (Steck, 2003). The lexicon of market economies includes “contracts”, “obligations”, “production”, “outcome”, “value”, “ownership” and “efficiency”, “negotiation”, and by contrast, the relational or gift economy, is a sociology of “labor”, “worth”, “gratitude”, “unbidden”, “free”, and “passion”.

The social bond is by definition not a contract with negotiated obligatory conditions of return, payment, or formalized exchange of goods and/or services. Though we may appropriate the language and logos of the corporation or a market economy and their resulting practices to operate our universities—like the performance of the faculty, we are unable to capture its very essence. The incongruity between the sociology of faculty-student relationships and the business of accountability handcuffs our efforts to ascertain how well faculty are teaching and how well students are learning. But what if we were to take on the ‘logic’ of the gift economy to judge the worth of these relationships, in an attempt to reconcile the inherent tensions between accountability demands and the “labor” of the faculty?ii
A gift economy is a system that creates social commitments that in turn convey the central and dominant ideals of institutions (Mauss, 1990/1950). Gift economies are composed of relationships not bound by obligation, and in which “ownership” of ideas and material goods is omitted. Gifts in these economies have worth but are not given value, i.e. gifts are not property or commodities given value by conditions outside the relationship. The worth of the gift is what it represents, what life it has beyond itself and its appropriation. Its worth is an erotic condition in that its form, function and utility are derivative of the individual giver in relationship with the recipient. In gift economies gifts are given “freely” with no expectation of reciprocity. Unlike market economies and their legal manifestation, the gift economy has its genesis in the form of an erotic relationship that bars the imposition of obligatory payment. We pay for commodities in a market economy; we pay for things that not free to move from person to person or within the larger public. If we were to “pay” for the gift given in the student-faculty relationship, we would be paying for ideas and knowledge. We then commodify ideas—teaching and learning—and in doing so, commodify that which can’t inherently be a commodity. Once teaching—a relational act—is viewed as a commodity—we are effectually paying to use the ideas of the faculty. Paying to use the ideas of the faculty violates the spirit and intent of the gift in that the historic purposes of both the academic profession and the university suggest that we do otherwise. To commodify the student-faculty relationship requires that faculty claim “ownership” of ideas, a matter as difficult to unravel as the relational Gordian knot. Additionally, when we commodify the student-faculty relationship, we may in fact be altering the ideals of academic freedom that anchor the profession. As Hyde (1983) suggests, academic freedom represents “the freedom of individuals
to have their ideas treated as gifts contributed to the group mind and therefore the freedom to participate in that mind” (p.82).

Part of the intricacy of the student-faculty relationship as is also true of a gift economy is its historic constitution by which I mean the traits of the profession and those of its recipients as they have evolved through time. Let’s recall that in gift economies the identities of the giver and the recipient have meaning. In gift economies, gifts carry the identity of the giver and the recipient acknowledges that “spirit” or “hau” or circumstance when she accepts the gift. That acknowledgment, the recognition of the intent of the gift, is what prevents indebtedness, or makes the gift an exchange subject to the rules of obligation (Derrida, 1992). As students, once we consciously or unconsciously recognize and acknowledge that the faculty’s gift to us is some aspect of their professional identity (and perhaps even their own individuality), we accept the faculty’s gift—their ideas, their teaching—because it has meaning. But as Derrida (1992) reminds us, in gift economies such as this, we must “forget” the meaning in order for the gift to be free. In other words, even though as faculty and students we may ‘know’ the intentional significance of the gift because of the weight of historic character of what it means to teach and what it means to learn, we give and accept gifts freely. Bound to the intricate nature of the academic profession, an identity scripted by the knotty sociology of an erotic relationship, the meaning of the gift is really symbolic.

The idea that gifts carry any symbolic meaning, though noted as the paradox and impossibility of the gift by theorists (Derrida, 1992), is useful when reconciling the mismatch between faculty productivity and accountability schemes and the gift economy of faculty-student relationships. Because a gift economy cannot ‘put a price’ on the gift, it
cannot require debt or obligation. As faculty this makes sense to us because we do not require students to compensate us directly for lessons, ideas, lectures or hourly advising sessions. I do not ‘charge’ my students and though they (or their fiduciary agents) may pay money to the university, these are two very different relationships. But as students we may recall feelings of “indebtedness” for certain faculty whose teaching and advisement mattered to us in some form; we can recall a desire to “repay” them for ‘what they taught us’. As faculty we can all recall actual “gifts” of repayment from students—a heartfelt note or appreciation, a book we may enjoy, verbal expressions of appreciation.

In the gift economy that is the student-faculty relationship, these are all symbolic debts; these are all acts that reflect the relational, emotional, erotic character of the economy. We cannot scale the gift; we cannot weigh or measure the symbolic.

The gift economy, friendship and feminist pedagogy in the university

Earlier I suggested that “faculty productivity” measures could be reconceived to reflect not a “production” model of teaching and learning but rather a “reproductive” one. Similar to Martin’s (1985) reconsideration of the ideal of “production” in K-12 education, to think about what faculty do as teachers in higher education and to judge its worth—to make sense of the gift’s symbolic meaning—requires not an understanding of students as “products” of the university (Kennedy, 1997, p. 59) but rather a view of the faculty-student relationship as a gift economy that is by definition “reproductive”. To think about the gift economy of faculty-student relationships in this way is to view worthy and attach importance to the personal and particular, to understand the gift as intentional and need specific—and to belong to an system of circulation that is not simply profit-bearing but rather socially cohesive or a system of “functional altruism” (Vaughan,
1997, p. 36). Gifts bond generations of students both to each other and to the greater society; the giving of gifts is a relational transmission of culture. Gifts bond individuals and individuals to groups. Gift economies are marked by an interdependent mutuality whose meaning, though symbolic, carries the mark of generosity and communality. Perhaps this is because the gift economy of student-faculty relationship functions in the medium of communication, of language and expressed ideas, of conversation and friendship.

Drawing on Raymond (1986), Noddings (1991) and John Dewey’s writings on sociality and individuality, in earlier work I have posited that we can understand female friendships as learning relationships characterized by “the value of familiarity and interdependency” (Martínez Alemán, 1997, p.145). The conversation brings into being the intellectual growth of the actors, making the relationship educational. Like the gift economy of faculty-student relationships, these friendships are relationships in which learning (the gift) is made possible through conversation. The economy of friendship aims to achieve “the fuller development of the individual” (p.130) through conversation and shared purposes and as a result is suggestive of the “functional altruism” that is characteristic of the faculty-student learning relationship. The gifts these friends give to each other in an economy of knowledge-sharing in which actors both give and receive, bear the same characteristics of the student-faculty relationship save for one distinction: friendship is a relationship of equals.

In these female friendship relationships, there is relative equality between the actors, a condition that is not present in professor-student relationships. The power imbalance that exists between faculty and student, though consonant with theories of gift giving, may be inconsistent with the assertion that the gift economy is reproductive or that the
gift moves and circulates. But like Aristotle’s “complete friendship” (*Nichomachean Ethics*), these friendships promote self-knowledge and like the gift economy, the recipient of the gift is transformed by the gift. We can view this transformation of self as the power of the gift—learning, self-knowledge, or education. But the gift economy, like friendship, requires some element of trust. In Aristotelian terms, friendship is rooted in virtue, implicit in which is trust. How does the trust necessary in friendship bear on the gift economy given the power imbalance between student and faculty?

If we follow Aristotle’s lead, we come to understand that we form and sustain friendships for many reasons, even for transitory and utilitarian reasons. Perhaps the professor-student relationship is not one of virtuous friendship, per se, but a relationship of utility and not use, not consumption. But what is the nature of this utility? Is it its gift qualities and are those qualities “reproductive” in that they are “functionally altruistic”? The utility of the friendship relationship may well be that it “gives” or that it is inherently “reproductive” in that it tends to the needs of the learner through and because of a social bond. The relationship is “reproductive” in that as feminist theorists suggest, it is antithetical to the ideals and norms of self-sufficiency prevalent in education (Martin, 2002). The relational bonds that serve as conduit for learning do suggest an implicit assumption of trust on the part of the learner, whether she be friend or he be student. This is a trust that is perhaps undermined by the “corporatization” of the university where the student is “consumer” and as such, understands learning as a contractual enterprise that by definition does not require “trust”. The “contractual” relationship is not one of friendship, or eros-trade, or gift and as such, does not require that parties “trust” each other in their exchange. Contracts regulate the exchange of goods between persons and erase the need
for trust between parties. There is no legitimate social bond between contractual parties; there is no need for trust.

But the reproductive character in the friendship economy, as in the economy of student-faculty relationships, certainly derivative of trust, involves a peculiar gift. Virtuous or complete friendship in Aristotle’s view is the source for self-knowledge, akin to the female friendships examined by Martínez Alemán (1997), Friedman (1993), Aries & Johnson (1983), and Raymond (1986). Is what characterizes these learning relationships of equal partners and that leads to self-knowledge different from that that resides in the professor-student relationship? The answer may lie in the fact that conceivably most professor-student relationships do not have self-knowledge as a pre-arranged aim. If subject-matter knowledge is understood as separate from or in competition with self-knowledge, then the gift economy of professor-student relationships must have characteristically different gifts—or different gifts for different relationships?

The nature of this gift relationship may thus be informed by the distinctions that students make about the credibility of the instructor that rely on the perceived competence or expertise of the teacher. Here, the applied psychological and sociological scholarship on human communication suggests that credibility as it applies to expertise or knowledge claims is a critical element in human communication. For example, echoing the findings of Cronkhite & Liska (1980), investing or trusting in the gift relationship may be a function of the student’s conscious or unconscious determination of the connection between learning aims and their perceptions of the abilities or expertise of the professor. Studies on dyads in the educational or psychological literature also offer a view that suggests that professor-student relationships may involve conditions of exchange and
norms of reciprocity (Roloff, 1981) and fairness (Canary & Stafford, 1992) that suggest not a gift economy but a commodity exchange. In these cases, has the faculty-student gift economy transgressed its historic and intellectual identity and taken on the “production” character of commodity exchange? Or does this research just suggest that the gift economy of student-faculty relationship has defaulted to one of commodity exchange because the recipient accepts the gift not as reproductive, or transformative, and or bearing symbolic meaning, but rather acknowledges the gift, assesses its value relative to other such gifts, and in doing so, treats it as a commodity to be consumed and used? Does the student as “consumer” gauge the cognitive authority and credibility of the faculty and in doing so nullify or invalidate the gift?

To answer this question it is important to examine the Western academy’s conception of cognitive authority or expertise and the credibility that it is conferred. Reasoned authority, an Aristotelian legacy in Western culture, demands that we consider the trustworthiness of the actor. According to Aristotle, for example, women could not be cognitive authorities because they lack reasoning capacities. To Aristotle, a woman lacked authority and consequently, her knowledge could not be trusted. Thus to be trustworthy requires rationality or some measure of perceived expertise perhaps derivative of position or identity. In the language of gift economies this suggests that the recipient trusts the gift because she trusts the giver. In other words, because it is tied to the identity of the giver (the faculty) the perception of the symbolic meaning of the gift (ideas and knowledge) is fundamental to the gift economy.

We can speculate, then, that cognitive authority or credibility in professor-student relationships must require a consideration of the identity of the expert or in this case, the
professor. Consequently, we can speculate that the gender of the faculty member may matter in this relationship, as well as perhaps race. Social science research suggests that these cultural markers of identity do seem to ‘matter’ in faculty-student relationships (e.g. hooks, 1989; Adams, 1992; Martínez Alemán, 1999). But what can be said about the professor’s perception of the cognitive authority and credibility of the student? Are students credible thinkers in the view of professors? Or is this gift economy essentially one-directional?

Feminist philosopher Lorraine Code’s (1991) extensive analysis of the construction of knowledge in the West sheds light on this issue in the following ways. First, if professor-student relationships are learning relationships then they are by definition informed by conceptions of cognitive authority, subjectivity, and power. For example, how as a consequence of academic culture authority and power are bestowed is a critical consideration. Second, if cognitive authority is exercised in an unequal relationship, say that of faculty and student, what can be said about the level or nature of the trust required for knowledge-transfer? Must students, due to the relational power imbalance borne of the cognitive authority given the professor, learn to “trust themselves to claim validity for their experiences and to be critical where they sense that they have placed their trust unwisely” (Code, 1991, p. 183)? Or is the professor-student relationship one in which cognitive authority solely requires one-directional trust? The scholarship on feminist pedagogy suggests differently.

Feminist academics, in my view, have by tradition attempted to affirm the gift economy in the university, and in particular, to assert the educative power of its reproductive character. Are faculty who “engage” students as “knower” through collaborative feminist
pedagogy enacting the reproductive gift economy and not the market exchange of “consumer” students? In *The Feminist Classroom* (1994), Maher and Tetreault describe how feminist teaching has challenged and transformed the American university. The separation of teaching from research, the perceived dichotomy between knowledge and practice, and the culture of privilege that marks the academic enterprise are reshaped by the introduction of feminist pedagogy into the college classroom. In these classrooms the relationship between the faculty and the student is said to be expanded and complicated; it is here that knowledge claims are made in what appears to be—at least conceptually—an exchange between equals and as an act of generosity that bears resemblance to reproductive gift economies like friendship and student-faculty relationships.

bell hooks (1989) explains that the feminist classroom “must first focus on the teacher-student relationship” and the imbalance of power between the actors (p. 52). The “all-knowing” professor is inimical to feminist pedagogy according to hooks because such a position of cognitive authority and power has historically been deployed to weaken student engagement (p. 52). This sentiment is endorsed by other articulations of feminist pedagogy (e. g. Gore 1993; Gabriel & Smithson, 1990; Maher, 1985). Maher’s and Tetreault’s (1994) examination of feminist classrooms revealed a conscious decision by the faculty studied to redefine cognitive authority in their professor-student relationships by validating students as academic authorities; that is, these faculty sought to make students authorities in subject matter by trusting in their abilities to ask questions and “confront academic material on their own terms” (p.130). In these relationships, then, the move to validate the cognitive authority of non-experts (students) suggests that faculty judge credible or trustworthy the capacity of students to be reasonable, to be inquirers.
with their guidance. Additionally, feminist faculty make a specific point of communicating to students that as teachers, they are not “all-knowing professors” (hooks, 1989, p.52) and that students also have cognitive authority.

Reminiscent of John Dewey’s pragmatic ideas about the relational nature of knowledge and the role of the teacher as expert guide (Dewey, 1916/1944), the feminist classrooms depicted in Maher & Tetreault (1994), Ropers-Huilman (1998), Bennett (1991), and Dewar (1991), for example, engage and empower students cognitively in ways to suggest a relational trust that defies the relational power imbalance. In other words, it appears that in these professor-student relationships there is a condition of mutuality that may assert the gift economy in student-faculty relationships and in doing so, reclaim the relationship’s worth and significance. As a result, could “feminist” faculty-student relationships help us rearticulate the faculty-student gift economy in higher education and as a result, provide a realistic model for assessing faculty labor?

Conclusions

The nature of the gift: accountability and the professor-student relationship

In this paper I have introduced the theory of gift giving as a possible means to reconcile the contradictions presented by accountability measures of “faculty productivity” in the American university. It was my intent in this paper to sketch the theory of gift economies and to show how, given the historical ideals that characterize the faculty-student relationship, a theory of gift giving could help us better judge the labor of the faculty. I suggested that it is the relational character of teaching that frustrates accountability measures and that perhaps if viewed as a gift economy—and in particular an economy with “reproductive” ends—we could better grasp the effectiveness of these relationships.
Heuristically, I suggested that perhaps a view of feminist pedagogies can inform how we can think about the faculty-student relationship as a gift economy, how feminist principles on cognitive authority and relational trust can help us tease out the intricacies of the relationship in its historic contexts—the higher learning then and in the university culture of “corporatization” now. I suspect that what is actually happening in the relationship is a reconciliation of sorts, that some form of modified gift economy (that though still true to the central tenets of gift theory) exists effectively within the corporate university and can be “counted”, so to speak. In other words, it’s likely that the student-faculty relationship, though still fundamentally and essentially a gift economy, can be brought into view in such a way as to effectively communicate to the public an accounting of its worth.

What is left is to “test” this theory, to examine if and how faculty conduct their teaching relationships as economies of giving, as extensions of Aristotelian friendship powered by eros, or as feminists construct their gift economy, as models of “reproductive” education, and to formulate a means to report this labor. Consequently, this paper serves as the theoretical foundation and guide for an empirical study of faculty-student relationships as a gift economy.
References


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ii There is an important distinction to be made between that which is “work” and that which is “labor”. In *The Human Condition* (1998/1958) Hannah Arendt suggests that the distinction is one primarily of distinguishing between action and leisure, between the life of the mind and praxis. Arendt reasons that it is the Platonic legacy of reverence for the contemplative (leisure) and the denigration human action (work). Hyde (1983) echoes these when suggesting that the distinction between “work” and “labor” is that “work” is done for remuneration and though we may get paid for our “labor”, “it’s harder to quantify” (p. 50). Labor, like the life of the academic, is “dictated by the course of life”, is “more bound up with feeling” and is “more interior” than work (p.51). Teaching is the “labor” of the faculty and as such it cannot be compensated as “work”.

iii These issues are at the core of how we negotiate “intellectual property” and also “patent” discoveries in the sciences. Once deemed the property of an individual or set of individuals, ideas are no longer free of charge and their movement is consequently restricted.

iv It is also important to note here that traditionally we view “individuation” and not “socialization” of students as a central purpose of the university. Rorty (2000) reminds us that John Dewey makes this distinction between the goals of primary and secondary education and those of tertiary education, and it is that difference that allows the university to engage in the free exchange of ideas. Thus, educative relationships in universities must have “individuation” of learners as their goal, an aim, Dewey would add, that is critical in a democracy.