

First Kiss

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Do you remember your first kiss? For me it was an awkward teenage experience: fumbling, figuring out the physics, marvelling at the neurochemistry of pleasure and swimming in a synaesthetic ocean of sensations. If you were anything like me, your first kiss was an amateurish affair, messy and ill-structured, satisfying in the way that leaves you not quite filled and certainly not empty, but rather desiring to know if it could indeed be better—the desire that leads to experimentation and variation with the second and third kisses, which indeed were better. In school nobody teaches you about kissing; this type of learning is one that has to take place in dialogic communion with another—it is an intimate act of social learning, one that can only take place in a relationship of mutual trust and *intervulnerability*. It is the type of learning where one learns both *from and with* an Other; where one is simultaneously teacher and student, never master but always learner. One's first kiss sometimes leads to many other fulfilling firsts.

The first years of teaching are very much like one's first kiss. One has finally worked up the courage to stand in front of a group of strangers and ask them to enter into an intimate relationship with you, to lower their natural barriers and allow you to enter into their sacred space. Apprehension and expectation; vulnerability faces vulnerability; the possibility of rejection palpable. These first years are often just as messy, awkward, and ill-structured as one's first kiss, but if they are indeed satisfying in the way that neither fills nor drains you, the desire to do better that can emerge provides the impetus for really learning what it means to honour the gift of vulnerability offered to you, and how to care for your own vulnerability as a teacher/educator. One learns that one learns *with and from* one's students and that one's vulnerability as a teacher is intertwined with one's students, as are their and your successes. *Learning* becomes the fulcrum of a classroom whose evolution is no longer constrained by concerns about teacher-centredness versus student-centredness. Learning as a process of ongoing experimentation and gradual imperceptible refinements of knowledge (content and pedagogical), technique, disposition, and philosophy moves the beginning teacher to the recognition of the privilege of inhabiting a space that is ever constituted, transformed, and maintained through ethical and loving relationships *with* others.

This type of learning, especially for novice teachers, is never easy as valued identities necessarily mutate over time. The first years of teaching are a problematic, confusing, conflicting, and sometimes painful space from which to operate as “one is already” even while “one is becoming” a teacher. Even with teacher preparation and experience there is a beautiful terror that teachers feel standing in front of their charges on the first day. For others there is the gradual realisation that the intellectual, emotional, and physical commitments that are required to teach are not quite aligned with their own competencies, expectations, or values, nor are the commitments demanded of teachers often commensurate with the financial reimbursement. This is valuable learning nevertheless. Not every person you kiss you end up marrying!

The first year of marriage is much like the first year of teaching—future husbands be warned! A lot of difficult and necessary learning has to take place as one learns to live sustainably in a relationship that is always both interdependent and intervulnerable. What helps a marriage or any committed relationship, including didactic ones, to survive is the nurturing of conditions for the

ongoing emergence and deepening of relationships of mutual learning—learning *from and with* another: sometimes teacher, sometimes student, but never master. These learning relationships, though, are founded on mutual trust and respect for difference, funded by an ongoing commitment to dialogue and meaningful conversation, and fuelled by the ever-emerging desire to know, do, and become better learners. In time, my wife and I will place our first kisses on our own children and we will smile knowing that, we, and they, have a lifetime of learning and awkward first kiss experiences ahead of us.

The memory of a first kiss experience is a blessing, reminding us that meaningful learning is often the product of intimate social interaction. In the gift of a first kiss we awaken to the potential of a life filled with love through learning *with and from* others, and we are roused to a deep compassion and concern for their well-being. Teachers, remember your first kiss!

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