In Motion

A Classroom Culture of Creative Generosity

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Abstract

This essay describes an aspirational framework, a way of seeing, that shapes how I have worked to build classroom culture in my high school English classes at a public Waldorf school in Northern California. I describe two related ideas: a year-long practice of literal gift exchange, in which students begin every class by offering something they have made, performed, or taught, and a broader metaphor, drawing on the work of Lewis Hyde and Marcel Mauss, in which the gift becomes an alternative to the transactional logic that shapes so much of classroom life, a way of seeing the movement of learning, risk, and meaning between people, and of taking responsibility for whether the room is ready to receive it. The essay follows the practice from its opening ritual through the harder discipline of building a room that knows how to receive, and reflects honestly on what happens when that culture is not yet ready to hold what a student brings.

Keywords: *creative generosity, classroom culture, vulnerability, subjectification, gift economy, Lewis Hyde, Waldorf education*

The Hidden Economy of the Classroom

Let me start with a confession: the metaphor I want to escape is one I keep using.

We often talk about classrooms in the language of economics without always noticing that we are doing it. Students earn grades, earn credit, earn the right to speak. Participation is rewarded. Attention might be distributed or withheld according to some unstated calculus. Even the word reward belongs to this system. So do the informal currencies of the room: whose voice holds value, whose ideas get traded forward, whose contributions arrive and find no takers.

I teach in a public Waldorf school in Northern California, where the culture is already oriented against this kind of reduction. The curriculum is built on the belief that what matters most in a child's development is precisely what resists measurement. Steiner's founding conviction, expressed across his 1919 lectures to the first Waldorf teachers, was that the school's health

would depend not on methods but on the inner life of its teachers: who they were, not only what they did. That is the tradition I work inside, and one I arrived at by an indirect road. I returned to high school teaching after nearly two decades in teacher education, where I spent years trying to build classrooms organized around generosity rather than transaction; in graduate seminars and professional development institutes; in rooms full of adults who were themselves trying to figure out what it meant to teach toward something other than a standardized, measurable outcome. Bringing that work into a ninth grade English class was a different kind of experiment. The stakes felt different. The students had less choice about being in the room, and less experience with what vulnerability in a learning space might offer them.

And still, even inside all of that, I catch myself keeping accounts. Did the lesson pay off? Was the output worth the investment? What did we produce today?

The problem is not the metaphor itself. Economies are real; and classrooms have them whether we name them or not. Students read the room quickly. They learn what kind of response earns warmth, whose questions get genuine attention, who holds currency and who does not. Those signals are never neutral. And in addition to the social hierarchies students carry through the door, they map onto race, class, gender, and other complexities of identity. The question I keep returning to is not whether a classroom economy exists, but whether we can imagine a different kind: one that runs on something other than accumulation and exchange. I think there is one.

What if the better metaphor is not a market, but a gift?

The Opening Ritual: Tags and Pennies

In the early weeks of the semester, I give every student a small white tag, the kind often used in stores to label merchandise. I ask them to write six words across the front: *I have a story to tell*. No explanation yet. Just the act of writing it down, claiming the possibility. The tags get tucked into notebooks and we move on, a bit of mystery hanging in the air. But the phrase stays in the room, waiting for something to attach itself to.

A few days later, the explanation arrives, or the beginning of one. I bring in a cloth bag and pass it to the first student in the row. Inside are dozens of old coins, wheat pennies, the copper ones minted between 1909 and 1958, worn smooth by time and handling, their backs stamped with two curved stalks of grain framing the words ONE CENT. I found a tin of them years ago at a weekend flea market, bought without knowing exactly why; the kind of purchase that only makes sense later. Now they live in my classroom, in the bag, on the shelf beside the window.

Each student reaches in and draws a single coin without looking. Whatever they pull is theirs to keep. We call out the dates: 1943, 1912, 1931, 1917. Someone always asks, *can we really keep these*? Yes. The room hums with something between surprise and pleasure. A few students hold their coins up to the light, rub a thumb across the face. We sit with the dates for a while, not rushing toward an assignment but staying inside the questions. I have found that ninth graders are surprisingly willing to do this, if you do not look like you are waiting for them to stop. What was happening then? Not just historically but imaginatively. Was it wartime? The Depression? What could a penny buy? Who carried this one, and where, and what were they thinking about when it passed through their hands?

Next, I hand each student a small clear bag, the kind used for jewelry findings or spare buttons, just large enough to hold a coin and a tag. I ask them to tuck both inside. The penny and the six

words are now visible through the plastic. The tag they wrote days ago now belongs with the penny: *I have a story to tell*, attached to an object that is already asking to be one. Some students smile when they make the connection. Others hold the two things together for a moment; the worn copper and the six handwritten words, before slipping them into the little bag.

Then I ask them to write. Not a history, I tell them. A moment. Something the coin stirs loose. A fiction, a fragment, an invented memory. They are free to choose the genre or form. Let the object be a doorway. What usually happens is that the writing moves: it begins in imagination and bends, without my asking, toward something more personal. The coin becomes a way in.

One student wrote about her grandmother, who had tucked a single coin inside every birthday card since she was three years old. "I never spent any of them," she wrote. "I didn't know why until now." She had been nearly invisible in early class discussions, quiet in a way that could easily be mistaken for disengagement but was not. After that piece, the room knew her a little differently. She seemed to hold more space.

Another student, a boy who had been working his way through a difficult family situation all semester, wrote about a coin that passes from father to son across three generations, each time at a moment of departure. He had not told anyone in the room about his own father. But the story was a gift, and we received it as one, without quite knowing what we were holding.

The Year-Long Practice: A Classroom of Givers

The penny writing is the first offering of the year. It is not the last. Beginning a few weeks into the semester, every class starts the same way: a student comes to the front of the room and gives a gift.

Not something bought in a store. Something made, found, performed, or taught. In the early weeks, the gifts tend to live in the hands: origami, card tricks, tutorials on how to draw something the rest of the class cannot. One student showed the class a magic trick and then, without being asked, explained how it worked. Another taught us the correct way to draw a spiral, standing at the board with the patience of someone who had practiced this many times. The offerings are genuine. But they live at some distance from the chest, and that is fine. The giver is still finding out how much of themselves the room can hold, and the room is still learning what to hold back in itself, its noise, its rush to respond, its discomfort with silence, and what it cannot yet hold from others.

After some time, the gifts begin to move inward. We have talked by then, more than once, about what makes an offering land, about the difference between showing the class something and offering them something of yourself, about what it feels like when the gift is very close to the person giving it. We also talk about the difference between personal and private. Personal is what we choose to bring into the room. Private is what we have every right to keep outside of it. The line is always the students' to draw, though I am aware that a classroom culture primed to reward vulnerability can make that line harder for some students to hold than others. A gift has to be freely given, or it is not a gift. I am not arguing that students should be exposed or made to feel unsafe. The personal/private distinction matters precisely because vulnerability has to be chosen, not coerced, to be a gift. What I am arguing is that a classroom that never asks students to bring themselves to the work, that settles for competence and compliance, is leaving something important unclaimed. And something shifts when that is said out loud. Students begin to take more risks. The gifts move closer to the chest.

One student brought a recording of her grandfather singing a song he had learned as a child in Poland and played it while we sat and listened. A student brought in the leather-working tools her uncle had left behind when he moved away, then demonstrated a single stitch, the same one he had taught her. A student brought in a stop-motion video he had been making for six months. It was thirty seconds long. We watched it four times, and each time he watched us watching it. Another student, who had been struggling all semester to find a foothold in the class, brought in a cake she had baked from a recipe her grandmother had carried from Palestine, and stood at the front of the room explaining what each ingredient was called in both Arabic and English. Later in the year, after her grandmother died, she came back to the front of the room and taught us how to make the paper flowers her grandmother had made for every family celebration. She cried a little while she taught us, and nobody looked away.

Students sometimes ask each other afterward what it felt like to bring something that personal into the room. The conversations are usually short and a little halting, but they name something the room has figured out together: that vulnerability, when it is met, changes the temperature of a place. And it is in that changed temperature that the room occasionally surprises itself. The thinking that emerges does not arrive on cue or fit neatly into a rubric. Not every gift reaches that register. But the ones that do, set the terms for everything else.

Some find an offering that earns warmth early and return to it, reliably, for the rest of the year. I have had students bring brownies in October and brownies in May, and the brownies in May are still delicious. I have learned to recognize the safe offering for what it is: sometimes a student needs a year of low-risk gifts before they are ready for something harder. Sometimes the brownies are the whole story, and that is its own kind of information. The same is true of the student who offers a precise observation in discussion, or who asks a question that reframes what the room thought it understood. Not every gift moves toward the personal. Some of the most generous offerings I have witnessed were intellectual, restrained, or entirely quiet. A student who listens with complete attention is also giving something.

The form is always the student's choice. The only requirement is that it comes from somewhere real, that it is offered with intention, and that it cannot simply be bought. A gift you make can carry something of the maker into the room.

I notice something else over the course of the year, though I am aware I may be seeing what I want to see. The writing tends to get more specific. Students seem to stay longer inside difficult moments on the page rather than moving past them. Something similar happens with reading. A student who has practiced being received seems to know, a little better, how to receive a text. Maybe.

The Discipline of Receiving

Giving is only half the practice. The other half, the harder half in some ways, is learning to receive.

Early in the year, before the gifts have begun in earnest, I talk with students directly about what it means to be an audience for something that matters to someone. Not a polite audience. Not a quiet one. A present one. We talk about what it feels like to offer something of yourself and have the other person look away, check a phone, or seemingly wait for it to be over. I ask them to think of a time outside of school when that happened: a story told at a family dinner that nobody picked up, a performance where the applause came too quickly, a moment shared with a friend who was already somewhere else. They do not have to think long. Then I ask them to

think of the opposite: a moment when someone was genuinely with them, when the attention in the space was real. Students know the difference immediately. They have been on both sides of it.

I tell them that receiving is not passive. It is a discipline that takes practice. It means turning toward what is being offered, letting something land before you decide what to do with it, resisting the impulse to evaluate, compare, or move on too quickly.

In the early weeks, I debrief after each gift. Not with grades or formal feedback but with a simple question to the room: what did you notice? Sometimes the answers are about the gift itself. Sometimes they are about the room. Once, after a particularly quiet presentation, a student said she had felt the class getting restless and had tried to speed up to keep their attention, and that the speeding up had made things worse. She had sensed the room drifting and chased it, and the chasing had cost her. The room sat with that for a while. It was one of the most useful things anyone said all semester, and we came back to it more than once in the months that followed. Often the most useful things said in my classroom are not said by me.

Over time the debriefs become less necessary. The culture learns to hold what is offered. But in the early months, before that culture has built itself, there are moments when it does not. One of those moments I carry with me still.

A student I will call Maira read a short memoir about the day her uncle was deported. She did not embellish or dramatize. She wrote it simply: the morning light, the silence in the kitchen, her mother's hands shaking. When she read it aloud her voice barely carried across the room. When she finished, the room fell quiet. But not the kind of quiet that holds a story. It was a silence edged with discomfort. A few students looked down. Someone shifted in a seat. Another leaned back in her chair in a way that, to me, put distance between herself and what had just been said. Nobody looked at Maira. I read the room the way I always do, and what I felt was contraction rather than opening. I waited too long to speak, unsure of what to say, and in that hesitation the moment slipped further. When I finally said something it was too careful, too measured, the kind of response that acknowledges without receiving. She folded the paper and walked back to her chair. I tried to follow up later, to tell her how much the piece mattered. But the current had already broken. What she had offered was not received.

It was not only timing. The story Maira brought was about immigration, family separation, a specific kind of fear that not every student in that room had to carry. The silence that followed was not awkward in a neutral sense. It was the silence of students who did not know how to sit with someone else's pain without fixing it or deflecting it. That is not a failure of empathy. It is something most of us have to learn: how to stay present with what is hard, how to let someone's grief or fear exist in the room without rushing to resolve it. The discipline of receiving is not only about attention. Sometimes it is about a tolerance for discomfort. And that takes longer to build than I had given it.

In the days that followed I found small ways to let Maira know that what she had shared mattered. She did not say much. But in the weeks that followed she became one of the room's most generous receivers, the kind of presence other students could feel when they were at the front of the room.

I want to be careful about what I am claiming here. It would be easy to read that arc as a kind of redemption: the moment failed, but she found her way back, and the class was richer for it. That reading flatters the practice and, more uncomfortably, it flatters me.

What I cannot know is whether Maira's generosity as a receiver was a form of flourishing or a form of self-protection. A student who has offered something real and felt the room contract around it has learned something, but not necessarily the thing I would want her to learn. She may have learned that the front of the room is not safe for what she actually carries, and that the safest way to remain in relation to the class is to give her attention outward rather than risk bringing herself forward again. Generous receiving, in that light, is not only a gift to others. It can also be a way of staying close to the door.

I do not know which it was for her. What I do know is that the practice asks students to take risks I cannot fully protect them from, and that the failure to receive well is not evenly distributed. The room's contraction was not random. It followed the shape of whose pain was legible and whose required more than the class had yet built the capacity to hold. That is not a flaw in her offering. It is a structural condition of the room; one I had a hand in creating and an obligation to name.

Receiving well is an ethical act. It is how the current stays alive. And building a room that knows how to do it requires not just modeling and practice but an honest reckoning with a harder question: whose offerings is the room actually prepared to hold, and who might carry more risk than others?

What the Gift Means: A Frame for What Is in Motion

I want to step back now and name the ground I have been standing on, because the practice I have described makes more sense when its roots are visible.

The French sociologist Marcel Mauss spent years studying gift-giving practices in Indigenous and Pacific Island cultures, societies in which the circulation of objects was never simply about the objects themselves. In his 1925 essay “The Gift,” written within an anthropological tradition that often framed non-Western societies as “primitive,” he observed that what travels with a given object is something of the person who gave it. A gift carries the giver into the world. And in being received, it does not close a loop but open one: it creates a kind of obligation, not in the cold sense of debt, but in the warmer sense of relation. To give, to receive, to reciprocate. These are not isolated acts. They are part of a system that sustains community across time.

In my classroom, the first two obligations are visible everywhere. The third takes a different form. Students do not reciprocate by giving back to the person who gave to them. They reciprocate by becoming better receivers for the next person who steps forward. The debt, if you can call it that, does not return to its source. It circulates.

Think about how a transaction works by contrast. I give you something worth five dollars, you give me something worth five dollars, and we are even. The exchange is complete. Neither of us owes the other anything. Neither of us carries anything forward. That is what a transaction is designed to do: close the loop, settle the account, release both parties from obligation. A gift does not work that way. What I give and what I receive are not the same, and they are not meant to be. Something passes between us that cannot be quantitatively measured, and that immeasurability is not a flaw in the exchange. It is the exchange.

Lewis Hyde (2007) extends this thinking in ways I keep returning to. In *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Hyde argues that the vitality of creative work depends on this same logic. A gift that stops circulating is no longer functioning as a gift. Its life is in movement, in being passed on, received, transformed, carried forward. Works of art exist simultaneously in two

economies: a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential. A work of art can survive without the market, but the gift cannot be removed from the work without destroying something at its core. It is not the skill of the making that gives a work its life. It is the spirit of offering in it, and the willingness of someone to receive that offering and carry it forward.

I think of the student who played a recording of her grandfather singing. The song existed before she brought it into the room. It had been recorded, preserved, carried across years and an ocean. But it became something else the morning she pressed play and we sat and listened together. What moved through the room in that silence was not the recording. It was the offering of it, and our receiving.

"Where there is no gift," Hyde writes, "there is no art" (Hyde, 2007, p. xvi).

What Hyde says about art is also true, I think, about learning. Work produced to satisfy a requirement is one thing. Work offered to a room, placed into the shared space with some genuine intention behind it, is another. What makes the difference is not skill or completion but whether the maker has something at stake in how it lands. That stake is not always visible in the work. But its absence usually is.

That is the gift economy of a classroom: not the market economy of grades and credit, but the slower, riskier movement of things that matter to people. I am not arguing that the transactional dimensions of classroom life are simply wrong. Grades, structure, and accountability serve real purposes, and students deserve clarity about what is expected of them. What I am arguing is that when transaction becomes the only logic available, something gets crowded out: the kind of meaning-making between people that no rubric can fully capture. I am aware that the analogy is doing some stretching. A classroom is not a studio, and learning is not identical to art-making. But the question Hyde is asking, what gives creative work its life and what kills it, seems to me genuinely continuous with the question I am asking about what makes student work vital and what leaves it inert.

Gert Biesta (2014) names something related when he describes what he calls subjectification: the emergence of the student as a singular person capable of speaking and acting in her own voice. This is, for Biesta, the most fragile and most important function of education, and also the one most threatened by the language of outcomes, measurement, and control that dominates so much of contemporary schooling. He calls it a "beautiful risk," and the phrase holds together in a way that resists being pulled apart. To teach toward subjectification is to accept that the most important things that happen in a classroom may not be the things you planned, and that you cannot know in advance whether the room will be ready to hold them. This cannot be managed. It resists control. Subjectivity cannot be engineered into a student. It can only be made possible, opened toward, invited, and at times patiently awaited (Biesta, 2014).

The role of the teacher, then, is to open spaces where that presence might surface. Not to produce it, but to make room for it. Not to manage emergence, but to risk it. And risk, here, is not only a condition we create for students. It is something the teacher has to practice too. The year-long gift practice asks students to bring something real to the front of the room, but it also asks me to let go of knowing in advance how class will begin, what the room will hold, where the time will go. I give the pennies without knowing what stories will come back. I sit with the class when a student is at the front and practice receiving alongside everyone else. Thirty years in, I am still surprised by what I do not

know how to receive. The structure is mine, but what happens inside it is co-created. That is, I think, how it has to be. A classroom culture of creative generosity cannot be modeled from behind a lesson plan. The teacher has to take the same risk.

In a Waldorf context, this language has roots that go back to Steiner's earliest thinking about what a teacher is for. The founding conviction of the first Waldorf school, as Steiner expressed it to the first Waldorf teachers in 1919, was that education is an art form, not a delivery system, and that reaching a child means reaching the whole person: thinking, feeling, and will together. The teacher who reads the students themselves as the primary text is already practicing something adjacent to what I am describing. What moves in a room like this is not just information but presence. The gift, in this sense, is whatever a student brings from their whole self.

That is what I mean when I call this a metaphor. The penny is a literal gift: a physical object given by me, kept in motion in a different form by each student. The practice extends that logic into daily life. But the metaphor goes further. It asks us to see every offering in the classroom, every story, every question, every risk taken in front of others, through the same lens. What is being given here? Who is giving it? And is the room ready to receive?

The Gift in Motion

This framework is not a method. It is not a fix. It is a way of seeing, a lens I return to when I am trying to make sense of what is unfolding in the room. It reminds me that what moves through a classroom is not just content or compliance. It is presence. Risk. Rhythm. Care.

The rituals falter. The risk does not always land. A student offers something honest and the room lets it pass. I miss a cue, stay too close to the lesson plan, and miss the moment that was actually available. But the question stays with me: What kind of space am I making here? What kind of relation does it invite?

Creative generosity, as I mean it, is not about polished projects or standout performances. It is the student who raises her hand with something half-formed, not sure yet if it is worth saying. The one who does not speak often but lingers after class to ask something quiet and real. The way a room shifts when someone tells the truth and others meet it, not with applause but with presence. These are not moments we can manufacture. But we can build toward them. In my experience, you build toward them mostly by showing up the same way you are asking students to.

Hyde (2007) writes that the gift must always move. Its value lives not in possession but in what it opens between people. That is what I want my classroom to be: a place where something is always in motion. Not just knowledge, but a willingness to meet what someone else brings. A place where stories, questions, insights, the small ephemeral things, can gain weight because they have been held, responded to, carried forward.

Steiner (1988) wrote that the smallest thing in its rightful place can lead to the highest goals. The tag is a small thing. The penny is a small thing. The student at the front of the room playing her grandfather's voice for us to hear or standing quietly with a paper flower in her hands: these are small things. But when the culture is working, when the room has learned to receive as well as to give, these small things open into something larger. Not a lesson. Not an outcome. Something closer to what Mauss was describing: a system that sustains relation. A way of saying, in the daily life of a classroom, *I see you. What you bring matters here.*

The work is fragile. The circuits break. Some

students keep their offerings to themselves because trust takes time, or because the room has not yet earned it. And sometimes what is given does not move forward. But when the current flows, when something real passes from one person to another, when a story meets a silence that knows how to hold it, that is when I see what a classroom can be.

The economy is still there. But so is the gift.

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