

Education, Not Initiation

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Plurality is the condition of human action, because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.¹

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to challenge the idea that education is a process of initiation. More precisely, I want to challenge the idea that social interaction requires a certain degree of commonality and that it is the very task of education to initiate the child into this commonality, so that thereupon it can take part in “real” social interaction.

My argument consists of three steps. I will start with a critique of the — not very sophisticated but nevertheless rather common — idea of education as a process of transmission. I will argue that the transmission-metaphor suggests an inadequate view of the dynamics of the process of education. I will then sketch the outlines of a *performative* conception of education, and argue that this presents a more adequate view of the dynamics of education. From the performative point of view it will become clear that “difference” and not “identity” is the key word in the pedagogical continuation of culture. Against this background I will raise the question whether commonality or difference is the basis of social interaction. My conclusion will be that social interaction — in so far as it is social — rests upon difference and that therefore education cannot and should not be understood as initiation.

EDUCATION AS TRANSMISSION

What first of all should be noted is that the idea of education as transmission — transmission of knowledge, of values, of attitudes, of culture, et cetera — entails a conceptual ambivalence. The point is that “transmission” can be used both to refer to the *process* of education and to its intended *outcome*. In the first instance, education is depicted as the activity of transmitting some content from the educator to the child. In this form, the transmission-metaphor goes back to the empiricist idea of education as the filling of an empty vessel or the writing on a clean slate.

From this point of view, education might better be described not as transmission but as an *attempt to transmit*. After all, it is generally acknowledged that there is no guarantee whatsoever that what the educator wants to transmit is actually received by the child. Ideally, however, this is anticipated in any attempt to educate. It is this anticipation that gives meaning to “transmission” as referring to the intended outcome of education. In a strict sense, something has been transmitted if an *identity* between educative “input” and “output” has been established.

The main problem with “transmission” as referring to the *process* of education, is that it does not provide an adequate insight into the actual dynamics of the educative process. The transmission metaphor assumes activity on the side of the educator and passivity on the side of the child. This assumption is, of course, problematic. After all, the child is active from the very beginning, and therefore, the educator is confronted with “living material” from the outset.

Traditionally, the active character of the child has been used to argue that education cannot be understood in a technical sense, that is, as a process of making.² Luhmann and Schorr have rightly pointed to the fact that this persistent problem of pedagogical technology has often not been reflected upon, but has been avoided on moral grounds. The impossibility of pedagogical technology, so they argue, has been made bearable by considering it undesirable.³

The active role of the child can, however, be taken into account in a more productive way. In order to do so, it must be acknowledged that the activities of the child are not random, aimless, or futile, but that from the very beginning onwards, and without any help of educators, the child is engaged in learning processes. The educator is therefore always already confronted with a self-developing and self-learning “system.”

The conclusion that should be drawn from this insight is *not* — and this is an idea often found in definitions of education inspired by developmental psychology — that education should *therefore* be understood as the guidance and supervision of this process of self-formation. After all, the choice whether or not to guide this process is not a natural necessity but a social and historical possibility. The only conclusion that by necessity follows is that everything that is offered in education, and any attempt to influence the development of the child into a certain direction, *always* takes place “by” and “through” the self-formative activities of the child, “by” and “through” what I suggest we call the *performativity* of the child.⁴ An adequate conception of education therefore has to take this performativity as its point of departure.

EDUCATION AND PERFORMATIVITY

To make clear what this implies in a more concrete manner, I will make use of some central ideas in the work of John Dewey, who has elaborated upon this “performative intuition” from a naturalistic and evolutionary perspective.⁵ The point of departure in Dewey’s “naturalistic humanism” is the contention that the human organism is a part of living nature, and that nature itself is something that actually develops. As a result of the ongoing “transaction” of organism and environment — Dewey stresses that the organism lives *by means of* an environment and not *in* an environment⁶ — changes are effected both in the environment and in the organism. This process can be described as a learning process, because the changes brought about in the organism predispose it to (re)act in future situations in a different and more specific way.

The point to be stressed is that the acquired predispositions are strictly individual. They are the result of the transaction of *this* organism with *its* environment, and are therefore literally unique. In this sense, every human organism constructs his or her own strictly individual and strictly idiosyncratic “worldview.”⁷

If next we pose the *didactical* question: How can the dispositions of the human organism be influenced? — How, in other words, is education possible? — there is only *one* answer. Education takes place by bringing the child into a specific situation or by (re)designing the situation the child is in, in the hope that the learning experiences of the child will develop in a certain (desired) direction. Dewey puts it as follows:

[T]he only way in which adults consciously control the kind of education which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act, and hence think and feel. We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment.⁸

What happens “inside” the child, what kind of “internal” learning processes take place cannot be determined.⁹ Except for reasons of efficiency, it also isn’t relevant to know what goes on “inside.”¹⁰ The only thing that counts is the outcome of the learning process. This outcome, however, cannot be established directly either. Whether the child has learned what the educator hoped it would learn, can only become clear in the subsequent interaction between child and adult, and only in so far as the result of the learning process plays an implicit or explicit role in this interaction. As long as the interaction goes on more or less smoothly, it can and must be assumed that both partners hold a sufficiently similar worldview. In Deweyan pragmatism the continuation of the interaction thus functions as the criterion for establishing agreement.

The claim that can be found in Dewey’s work is that social interaction — or to be more precise: purposeful social cooperation¹¹ — not only functions as the criterion for agreement, but also as the *mechanism* that brings agreement about. Successful cooperation requires a certain degree of agreement between individual worldviews or perspectives. From a theoretical point of view, the perspectives of the interacting partners are at the outset strictly individual and idiosyncratic. With the development of their individual actions into a joint activity, their respective perspectives undergo a transformation. Similar meanings spring up because both persons are engaged as partners in an action where what each does depends upon and influences what the other does. “Understanding one another,” Dewey concludes, “means that objects, including sounds, have the same value for both with respect to carrying on a common pursuit.”¹² In this way, the world is literally *made* in common. Dewey refers to this as *communication*, but for him communication is not the transmission of thoughts and feelings from one person or mind to another person or mind. Communication is a co-constructive process; it is the activity of “the making of something in common.”¹³ This means that purposeful social cooperation only effects the *convergence* of individual perspectives into a common perspective; the transformation and reconstruction of the individual perspectives themselves remains an individual achievement.

If we look at the process of education from this point of view, it becomes clear that what appears to be a process of transmission — at moment *t* the educator disposes of certain knowledge or skills et cetera; next the educator and the child interact with each other; at moment *t+1* both the educator and the child dispose of the knowledge or skills et cetera — is in fact not such a process. The educator does not transmit anything to the child; what actually takes place is a *convergence of the individual achievements of the educator and child brought about by a specific form of social interaction* (namely, purposeful social cooperation). This means that the transmission metaphor presents us with an inadequate description of the *process* of education.

What about the (intended) outcome of education? Is it still possible to use the concept of “transmission” here? Can we still say that something has been transmitted

if an identity between “input” and “output” has been established? Does this count as a successful outcome of education? And is it a realistic aim of education?

Once again, the answer has to be no. I have shown that if we take the performativity of the child seriously, the outcome of educative processes has to be understood as the convergence of strictly idiosyncratic perspectives brought about by a *concrete* process of social cooperation. Because this convergence is always the result of a concrete and specific process of social interaction between specific individuals with their specific histories, the chance that this will result in a *complete* identity¹⁴ between the “state of mind” of the educator and the “state of mind” of the child — between educative input and educative result — is negligible. To this comes the fact, that any such agreement can only be determined in a *practical* way. As long as the interaction goes on more or less smoothly, it must be assumed that there is a sufficient degree of agreement. But in any new situation this agreement can prove to be insufficient, or better, specific. This means that the idea of education as transmission in the sense of an identity between input and output depicts a practical impossibility.

This conclusion should not be read as the contention that every attempt to transmit is by definition doomed to fail, and that — as for example, Kant and Freud have argued¹⁵ — education is therefore a frustrating or even an impossible activity. On the contrary. Once it is recognized that the input of education is not passively assimilated but performatively identified so that there is always a *margin* or a *gap* between input and output,¹⁶ and once it is acknowledged that this margin or gap is constitutive of the very process of education, it not only becomes clear that culture — in the broadest sense of the word — is located in the “performances” of individual actors, but also that the continuation of culture is by necessity dependent upon the transformative and differentiating performativity of these actors.¹⁷ The conclusion must therefore be that “difference” and not “identity” is the key word in the pedagogical continuation of culture.

EDUCATION AS EVENT

The conclusion that an identity between input and output can never be reached raises questions about the possibility of social interaction. Isn't it the case — so it might be objected — that social interaction is based upon the possibility of mutual understanding? Isn't it the case that mutual understanding can only be reached by virtue of some common ground? And isn't it precisely the task of education to bring about such a common ground, so that thereupon the child can take part in social interaction? If the performative point of view puts all this in jeopardy, isn't this a strong indication that it is not a viable alternative to the idea of education as transmission?

Part of the argument for answering these questions in the negative can be found in the work of Jacques Derrida.¹⁸ In the context of a discussion of Austin's theory of speech acts, Derrida deals with the problem of the possibility of misunderstanding, or the failure of performative speech acts. Derrida observes that while Austin acknowledges the fact that performative speech acts always run the risk of misunderstanding, he nevertheless tries to exclude this risk as accidental and exterior by

defining indispensable conditions of success.¹⁹ Contrary to Austin, Derrida suggests that if the failure of speech acts is a general risk, that is, if it is *always* possible that speech acts are misunderstood, then the question should be raised whether this “necessary possibility” of failure might not better be understood as constitutive of, and not — as Austin does — as an exception to “normal” social interaction.²⁰

The main reason Derrida gives for answering this question in the positive rests upon the insight that a successful speech act, that is, a speech act that is not misunderstood, can only exist if the context in which such a speech act disseminates is *exhaustively* determined.²¹ Such an exhaustive determination can, however, never be an empirical reality, because every utterance has to be taken up by the addressee. The dissemination of speech acts is inherently *unpredictable*. The idea of the exhaustive determination of the context of dissemination therefore is an “idealized image,” an “ethical and teleological determination” of this context.²² Derrida concludes that the general risk or failure does not surround language “like a kind of *ditch* or external place of perdition which speech...can escape by remaining “at home,” by and in itself.” On the contrary, this risk is “its internal and positive condition of possibility.”²³

The plausibility of Derrida’s argument becomes clear if we imagine the situation where language would be *without* risk. In such a situation social interaction would have ceased to be what Derrida calls an *event*; instead it would have become a strictly mechanical, a strictly calculable and predictable process.²⁴ In such a situation it would be meaningless to intervene in social interaction by means of speech acts. In a mechanistic universe, an utterance like “I promise” adds nothing to the interaction, because all the consequences of action are already determined and are strictly transparent for the other actors, whose own reactions are already determined as well. The fact that speech acts can always fail therefore suggests that human interaction is not a mechanism.

This insight plays a central role in the way in which Hannah Arendt analyzes human interaction in her book: *The Human Condition*. Arendt makes a distinction between three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. While *labor* is the human activity “which corresponds to the biological process of the human body,” and *work* is the activity which corresponds to the “unnaturalness of human existence” in that it provides an “artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings,” *action* is “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter.”²⁵ To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin. For Arendt, action is closely connected with the human condition of *nativity*.²⁶ Action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, because with each birth something “uniquely new” comes into the world.²⁷

Arendt’s reason for stressing that action is not a mechanism, not an interaction of “performing robots”²⁸ is that men differ from each other and disclose their “distinct uniqueness,” their “singularity” in all their acting and speaking. “Action...corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world.”²⁹ Arendt stresses, that if this would not be the case, that is, if men were “endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model,

whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing,” then action would be an “unnecessary luxury” and a “capricious interference with general laws of behavior.”³⁰

The idea that in acting and speaking “men reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world”³¹ should not be read as the contention that some pre-determined identity is brought into the open. Arendt stresses that nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in word and deed. This only becomes clear — both for other people and for the actor himself — in the sphere of action, in the sphere of intersubjectivity, that is, “where people are *with* others,” where there is “sheer human togetherness.”³² The agent that is disclosed in the act should therefore not be understood as an “author” or “producer,” but as a *subject* in the twofold sense of the word, namely, as one who began an action and as the one who suffers from its consequences.³³ Because human beings disclose themselves in action and because action acts upon beings “who are capable of their own actions,”³⁴ the domain of action is boundless and inherently unpredictable.³⁵ Therefore, action as disclosure in the realm of human intersubjectivity always entails a *risk*.³⁶

Derrida and Arendt introduce a crucial reversal in the common way of thinking about social interaction. They show that social interaction — in so far as it is social and not a mechanism — is not based upon agreement, identity, and consensus, but exists by virtue of difference, singularity and dissensus. They show that social interaction — in so far as it is social and not a mechanism — does not require a common ground. They show, in other words, that a community that rests upon some pre-communal common ground is not a *human* community.³⁷ Arendt is therefore more than right in arguing that “plurality is the condition of human action.”³⁸ Any attempt to circumvent or deny this radical plurality — for example, by taking recourse to a natural or cultural human identity³⁹ — misses the point of what *human* interaction, contrary to the interaction of “performing robots,” entails, namely, that it is an *event*.

The pedagogical relevance of the reversal suggested by Derrida and Arendt comes particularly to the fore in Arendt’s argument that the eventful character of social interaction is a prerequisite for the (possibility of the) performative articulation of the singularity⁴⁰ of the subject. Arendt warns us that

(without) the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is then indeed no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object.⁴¹

If the possibility of disclosure is valued — and to my mind both the modern and (as I have argued elsewhere⁴²) the postmodern “project” of education are precisely based upon this valuation — then it is of crucial importance to preserve the eventful character of human (including pedagogical) interaction.

CONCLUSION

What does all this imply for the idea of education as initiation in the sense of bringing about a commonality that enables social interaction? Is education rightly depicted as a process that precedes “real” social interaction? Is education rightly

understood as the transmission of a common ground so that thereupon “real” social interaction becomes possible? Are education and politics therefore two separate realms of human interaction?

It will not come as a surprise that my answer to these questions is in the negative. If social interaction requires a common ground, then it might be conceivable that there exists a distinct activity called “education” that is precisely meant to bring about this common ground so that thereupon social interaction can take place. In that case, education is a praxis that precedes “real” social interaction, and if we refer to this interaction as “political,” then there is a fundamental difference between pedagogical and political interaction. The point that I have tried to make in this paper is, however, that social interaction — in so far as it is social and not a mechanism — does not require such a common ground because, to quote Arendt once more, *plurality* is the condition of human action. It is for this reason that education cannot be adequately understood as initiation in the above-mentioned sense. This in turn means that there is no essential difference between pedagogical interaction and social interaction, and thus no essential difference between the realm of pedagogy and the realm of politics.⁴³

All this is not to say that education — as a “really existing praxis” — does not or should not introduce the child into the world. My only point is that education is not a communication that precedes all communication, an intersubjectivity that precedes all intersubjectivity, or an initiation that only makes social interaction possible. My point is that education is itself communicative, intersubjective, and interactive, and that it is on this basis that the actual introduction into the world, and all actual teaching and learning, take place.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989[1958]), 8.

2. See, for example, Klaus Mollenhauer, *Vergessene Zusammenhänge: Ueber Kultur und Erziehung [Forgotten Relationships: On Culture and Education]* (München: Juventa, 1983).

3. Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhardt Schorr, “Das Technologiedefizit der Erziehung und die Pädagogik [The Lack of Technology in Education and Pedagogy],” in *Zwischen Technologie und Selbstreferenz: Fragen an die Pädagogik [Between Technology and Self-Reference: Questions for Pedagogy]*, ed. Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhardt Schorr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 12-13.

4. The main source of inspiration for the idea of a performative conception of education is James Donald, *Sentimental Education* (London/New York: Verso, 1992). See also Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).

5. I have discussed this in more detail — but with an insufficient sensitivity for dissensus and difference — in the following two publications: Gert J.J. Biesta, “Education as Practical Intersubjectivity: Towards a Critical-Pragmatic Understanding of Education,” *Educational Theory* 44, no. 3 (1994): 299-317, and Gert J.J. Biesta, “Pragmatism as a Pedagogy of Communicative Action,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 13 (1994): 273-90.

6. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry in John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 12: 1938, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 32.

7. This worldview, or perspective, is not necessarily conscious or reflexive. All action implies and expresses a worldview.

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education in John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 9: 1916, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 22-23.

9. Even NMR-scans that are used to show the location of thinking in the cortex need an external criterion to decide what actually is depicted.

10. When it takes a child one hour to add two one-digit numbers, it might be necessary to improve the “internal” efficiency of the process. But even then, this efficiency can only be improved from the outside.

11. According to Dewey the aim is itself also created in the joint activity. See Biesta, “Pragmatism as a Pedagogy of Communicative Action.”

12. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 19.

13. Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 52. See also Biesta, “Pragmatism as a Pedagogy of Communicative Action.”

14. This is, of course, an overstatement because identity is always already complete.

15. Kant has argued that there are two human inventions “which may be considered more difficult than any others...the art of government, and the art of education”; Freud has called education one of the three “impossible professions” (see Donald, *Sentimental Education*, 1).

16. Cf. Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac, “Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics,” in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London/New York: Verso), 11-39.

17. Cf. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 139-97.

18. My main source of reference is: Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

19. See *ibid.*, 14-15.

20. *Ibid.*, 15.

21. *Ibid.*, 18.

22. *Ibid.*, 17.

23. *Ibid.*

24. See Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 91.

25. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7. It should be noted that there is a conceptual ambivalence in the way in which Arendt uses the concept of “action.” On the one hand, she uses it to refer to the activities of human beings; on the other hand, she uses it in the specific sense of an interaction in which men reveal themselves through their action and speech. In the remainder of this text, I will express this distinction by using the terms “activity” and “action” or “human interaction” whenever this is possible.

26. “The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.” *Ibid.*, 9.

27. *Ibid.*, 178.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 7.

30. *Ibid.*, 8.

31. *Ibid.*, 179.

32. *Ibid.*, 180.

33. *Ibid.*, 184.

34. *Ibid.*, 190.

35. *Ibid.*, 190-91.

36. *Ibid.*, 180. Surprisingly, Arendt does draw this conclusion with respect to the interaction between adults, but not with respect to the interaction between adults and children. While Arendt locates the interaction between adults in the, by definition, undetermined and undeterminable public realm of politics, she situates education in the private realm and makes a plea for a firm separation between these two domains. See Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis of Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961). It will be clear that I intend to use “Arendt against Arendt” with respect to this separation and the implied conception of education. See also Honig, *Political Theory*, 82.

37. Cf. Jan Masschelein, "Grenzen aan de Identiteit [The Limits of Identity]," *Pedagogisch Tijdschrift (Special Issue)* (1993): 39-42.

38. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.

39. Masschelein has observed that it is precisely this which unites liberals and communitarians. Both try to found politics upon something beyond politics. Liberals make use of the natural identity of reason; communitarians make use of the cultural identity of the group. Both therefore in a sense circumvent the radical plurality that is constitutive of human interaction. See Masschelein, "Grenzen aan de Identiteit."

40. Arendt uses the term "identity." It will be clear from the preceding text, that I consider this a problematic term.

41. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

42. See Gert J.J. Biesta, "Postmodernism and the Repoliticization of Education," *Interchange* 26, no. 2 (1995): 161-83.

43. This suggests that any existing difference between these two realms is itself of a political character.