

Can Education Be Rid of Clichés?

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“Beauty is a brief gasp between one cliché and another.”

Ezra Pound (1935)

“Anyone who has ever tried to argue over a cliché knows it is impossible. Not reason but power conquers the cliché.”

Stefano Harney (2003)

Educational discourse seems to be packed with clichés. From the general “children are the future” to the semi-professional “learning styles” or “growth mindset” and through “teachers change lives” or “teaching the whole child,” clichés and platitudes are almost inescapable when educational issues are discussed. Could there be another way for teachers, parents, policy makers, and scholars to talk about education? One in which meaningful content will replace banality and repetition?

In order to point to a way out of this crippling conversation, we must first better understand it. Specifically, we need to address the cliché’s success – its appeal for both speaker and listener and its effects on them. Therefore, in the first section, I examine the cliché as a particular speech act, emphasizing its performative function and modern character. Drawing on literary and sociologist examinations of clichés, and mainly on Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Adolf Eichmann’s distinct form of speech,¹ I claim that unlike the common view of the cliché as a worn-out and ineffective phrase, it is actually quite successful in creating consent, quieting conversation and thought, and in providing the speaker with a unique sense of elation. Moreover, I show that the use of clichés is symptomatic to modernity. After establishing the traits and effects of the cliché, I show in the second section that education is uniquely susceptible to

an extensive use of clichés due to some of its inherent structural tensions, and finally, I return to Arendt's report of Eichmann's trial, to suggest that her unmethodical critique could prove useful in confronting the challenge of regulated and repetitive speech.

WHAT IS A CLICHÉ? WHAT DOES IT DO?

Clichés are commonly understood as “ineffective” and as a sort of linguistic “failure.” Indeed, clichés do not seem to deliver any real content and they don't contribute anything new to a conversation. This, however, does not mean that they are not functionally successful. On the contrary, it is exactly those characteristics (and more) that turn the cliché into a powerful speech act. In this section, I will try to define exactly what the function of the cliché is.

So, what is a cliché? And what does it do? While we easily recognize clichés, it is still quite difficult to define it. In fact, clichés reject formal linguistic definitions. As the literary scholar Ruth Amossy states: “It would never be enough to define them in purely formal terms, since clichés are based not only on a spatial arrangement (figures of speech, structures), but on a temporal dimension as well: clichés are clichés by virtue of a phenomenon of repetition.”²² Moreover, the repetition of the banal phrase must be of a particular kind – it erases origins, and amounts to a limitless circulation, in which the cliché is spoken by an anonymous voice. Paradoxically, the listener is compelled to identify with this voice which he regards as “both his own and as radically foreign to him.”²³ In his treatise *On Clichés*, the Dutch sociologist Anton Zijderveld claims that the cliché is primarily a sociological phenomenon, and that its main feature is “the change from symbolic vigor and semantic power, to social and/or political functionality,” culminating in what he refers to as the “superseding of meaning by function.”²⁴ From a more political perspective, social theorist Stefano Harney points to the fact that “anyone who has ever tried to argue over a cliché knows it is impossible. Not reason but power conquers the cliché,”²⁵ meaning, in my understanding, that the cliché simply does not correspond adequately to norms of rational argumentation that exist

in a “regular” conversation. Instead, it works through the power relations it represents and reproduces.

Created through endless circulation and automatization of speech, the cliché is a modern phenomenon as attested by the word’s origin. It originated as an onomatopoeia that signified in French printers’ jargon the then innovative use of type-casts. Illustrations that prior to this invention were carefully and painstakingly drawn and painted could now be produced quickly and massively. They did lack the meaningful uniqueness of earlier illustrations, but they were made available for large quantities of viewers and readers as common words and phrases were also put into a similar type-cast. This new technique, which apparently made a sort of “click” sound, greatly increased productivity, and contributed to the emergence of mass printing. Only later, towards the end of the 19th century, did the word become a metaphor and achieve its current meaning. Although we can certainly find in antiquity critique of thoughtless speech, “cliché” became the dismissive term we know today only in the context of appreciation for individual expression and the threat to originality posed by modern industrial life.⁶

So, what are the effects of a cliché? What happens when it is uttered? When encountering a cliché in a conversation, the listener is driven to a sort of automatic agreement accompanied by a cozy feeling of togetherness. Whereas a lie or, in fact, any decisive statement can be argued from a rational or factual perspective, this is not the situation with clichés, as they are concerned mainly with emotional response. Let’s take for example a familiar and harmless cliché such as “children are the future.” Is there really any point in arguing over this? Can anyone deny that indeed this is true? And if one insists on questioning the self-evident truth of this saying, wondering about the meaning of this “future” or what exactly do we have to do about it, by doing that the speaker is clearly, and quite rudely, missing the cliché’s intent – achieving an immediate and thoughtless agreement. Preserving this feel-good consent requires that nothing of substance will be added to the conversation, least of all, reflection, disagreement, critique or judgment. Clichés, then, despite their friendly appearance are nothing less than conversation killers.

It can even be said that some clichés terminate not only speech but thought itself. In his study of American POWs in Korea, the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton came up with the useful term *thought-terminating cliché*:

The language of the totalist environment is characterized by the thought-terminating cliché. The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. ... Totalist language, then, is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: in Lionel Trilling's phrase, 'the language of nonthought.' ... For an individual person, the effect of the language of ideological totalism can be summed up in one word: constriction. He is, so to speak, linguistically deprived; and since language is so central to all human experience, his capacities for thinking and feeling are immensely narrowed.⁷

But there is no need to go all the way to Manchurian candidates and "brain washing" techniques to find thought and speech arrested by clichés. As Zijderfeld indicates, even when used daily and in "normal" situations (perhaps it is the cliché that normalizes the situation) clichés tend "to mold conversations and to hold a firm grip over the individual's consciousness; ... They bypass reflection and thus unconsciously work on the mind, while excluding potential relativizations."⁸ In short, clichés are "assumptions [that] persist by habit alone, repeated but unexamined."⁹

What I find to be lacking in the discussions about the nature of the cliché is their effect on the speaker, the one who utters it. This aspect of the cliché is largely ignored, and even when clichés are discussed critically they are still understood as one-sided, top-down manipulations in which power is simply, and intentionally, directed from the speaker onto the listener.

Hannah Arendt's examination of Adolf Eichmann's speech during

his trial and police interrogation is an enlightening exception in this respect. Taking the cliché into a moral and political discussion, Arendt provides a unique account of its production. While not attempting to offer an all-encompassing theory of political speech, Eichmann for her is not merely a unique individual, but a representative of a corrupted form of modern morality and of modern speech. She describes Eichmann's personality as consumed by "empty talk" he constantly produces, as if "he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché." Eichmann even admitted that *officialese* is his "only language;" his "mind full to the brim" with slogans and stock phrases. Not only was he quoting others' worn-out phrases but even "when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché."¹⁰ George Orwell's famous account of bad political writing seems to be an exact description of Eichmann who "either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not".¹¹

Arendt claims that in speaking this way, Eichmann was consoling himself, and that his clichés were not issued from above but were "self-fabricated" for the "‘extraordinary sense of elation’ it gave to the speaker the moment it popped out of his mouth."¹² This self-consolation and sense of self-importance arise from the ability of clichés to pleasantly shut down not only the other person, but first and foremost one's own lingering doubts, moral dilemmas and personal failures.

And Eichmann was certainly not the only one to do so. Arendt notes that one of his favorite phrases - stating his will to "make peace with his former enemies"- was shared by many other ordinary Germans at the time "who were heard to express themselves in exactly the same terms at the end of the war."¹³ Even a witness for the prosecution, Heinrich Gruber- one of the few Germans who held a firm objection to Nazi policy towards the Jews- had resorted to clichés in his time of need. When asked by Eichmann's attorney whether or not he tried to influence Eichmann or appeal to his feelings and sense of morality, Gruber said that he did not do such a thing, because "words would have been useless" and "deeds are more effective than words" (as if Eichmann's job involved anything but words). As Arendt notices, he answered with "precisely

those stock phrases that the judges on another occasion declared to be ‘empty talk.’”¹⁴ Gruber’s ready-made answers, like any other political cliché, were aimed at silencing moral difficulties, at putting his own conscience to sleep.

It is not only conscience that is advised by the cliché to take a rest but reality itself. Arendt notes that during the whole trial, Eichmann failed to explain or properly understand his actions. He did not even grasp his current situation and was surprised and disappointed with the final verdict. Even at his own hanging he had nothing to say but worn-out clichés, so he would be “elated” and forget “that this was his own funeral.”¹⁵ Arendt suggests that for Eichmann, and, of course, not only for him, clichés and conformity in speaking was a practice that covered up reality. A practice that, if commonly used, becomes the only available option:

The longer one listened to him [to Eichmann], the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.¹⁶

For Arendt, this inability to think or avoidance of it are tightly connected to modernity. She comments elsewhere that “thoughtlessness – the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty – seems [to me] among the outstanding characteristics of our time.”¹⁷ For the non-thinker, therefore, an extensive use of clichés would be anything but surprising.

Before I turn to clichés in education, there is a little more to be said about the connection between clichés and modernity. This connection is not only made possible by modern industry, and the mass production of cultural objects that intensified the repetition of phrases and images to an unimagined before extent. We can also say that there is something in the modern condition

itself that invites their use, or as Zijderveld puts it: “The nature of modernity is such that it strongly fosters the functionality of clichés.”¹⁸ He points to the modern process in which society becomes increasingly abstract, traditional institutions grow thin and ephemeral, and meanings, values and norms lose their earlier stability. In such conditions of uncertainty, the cliché provides a much needed clarity and a sense of belonging. These are, of course, largely artificial, but nevertheless they fill the intimidating modern void caused by the decline of traditional institutions. Therefore, the school as a modern institution, perhaps *the* modern institution, would be susceptible to be dominated by clichés.

EDUCATION AND CLICHÉS

If educational discourse is indeed marked by clichés, then the question is *why* does it require so many “safeguards against reality”? I certainly do not think that education is the only field in which clichés are abundant. Conversations about politics, sports, religion, or art are consumed by clichés as well, and, in fact, with enough time and repetition any discourse produces its own set of stock phrases. Nevertheless, we should ask whether there are specific characteristics of education that invite banal speech. In no way is this short paper a comprehensive analysis of educational discourse, but still I want to point at a few tensions inherent in education that make it prone to an extensive use of clichés.

First, as a field of study and not a specific discipline, education is dependent almost entirely on concepts that emerged in other established disciplines. Psychology, medicine, sociology, philosophy, and economics are among the prominent disciplines contributing to educational research. In this state of having to “import” most, if not all, of its methods and analytical concepts from elsewhere, education finds itself using these “foreign” and ready-made concepts metaphorically and often superficially, turning them rapidly into clichés. For example, the adoption of the economic concept of “growth” by educational psychology has resulted in “growth mindset,” which unfortunately is understood by teachers and students (and sometimes by scholars) in a very simplistic way. About two years ago, I asked my daughter whether she enjoyed

her first couple of days in middle school, and she replied that it was a bit boring because almost all the teachers lectured them about growth mindset. The term itself was understood by the students, and probably by the teachers too, as basically a motivational injection – “if you just want something bad enough and set your mind to achieving it, you will succeed!” To the best of my knowledge, critiques of growth that are quite important in economics, are completely absent from the educational discourse, and growth in education is still regarded as an obvious good. For example, while more and more economists doubt the connection between growth and reduction of poverty, in classrooms, and perhaps even in education schools, growth mindset is still unquestionably conceived as another approach for narrowing the achievement gap. In other words, growth mindset became a cliché.

Among other reasons, education’s dependency on other disciplines also lowers its prestige. Whether this is justified or not, studying philosophy, economics or psychology in their “home” departments is considered far more rigorous than studying them in the form of “_____ of education” or “educational _____,” and faculty from these departments are hired by education schools at a much higher rate than the other way around. Historian of Education David Labaree is brutally honest about the low status of educational research:

Our colleagues in the university think of us as being academically weak and narrowly vocational. They see us not as peers in the world of higher education but as an embarrassment that should not really be part of a university at all. To them we look less like a school of medicine than a school of cosmetology. The most prestigious universities often try to limit the education school’s ability to grant degrees or even eliminate it altogether. ... The conclusion is clear: we rank at the very bottom. As a result of this, we have zero credibility in making pronouncements about education.¹⁹

In the face of such a disadvantage, speaking in clichés in order to hide this disturbing reality and console oneself is perfectly understandable. Endlessly repeating the importance of education for the nation, for social equality, for

personal autonomy, for human progress itself, allows both speaker and listener to avoid this inconvenient truth and regain a (artificial) sense of value. For Labaree, one such alternative source of self-worth is the rhetoric of progressive pedagogies, and he claims that the reason for educational researchers' "longstanding, deeply rooted and widely shared rhetorical commitment to the progressive vision"²⁰ is found exactly in their weakness and inability to influence pedagogical practices, often including their own. The fact that "Dewey's picture is found on the wall in so many education school offices for so many years"²¹ is not only a matter of appreciation for the content of his theories, but mainly due to the image's uplifting function. Dewey's picture, in other words, is a visual cliché – it creates a comfortable mood of elation, uniqueness and community, and at the same time it prevents any meaningful discussion of actual pedagogical changes.

Second, education is not only a scholarly field but a practice, and as such it is exposed to another kind of pressure, or temptation, to resort to clichés. As educational policy researcher John Walton shows, expected to "bridge the ravine that separates theory and practice," and pressured by the "harsh penalties of practice," educationalists, as "practical men," tend to "the most plausible and efficient solutions to the immediate problems they confront, thereby bringing about a kind of closure that excludes consideration of less obvious, more indirect solutions."²² These solutions turn into conventional wisdom that is not informed enough by theory, and having to be transmitted widely, this wisdom takes on a simplistic and banal form.

The practical pressure on educators is increased by the centrality of schooling, and I suggest that the fact that almost all educational theory and practice in the last two centuries revolve around the school adds to the likelihood of clichés. As we have seen earlier, clichés are formed through automatization and endless circulation of speech. Unfortunately, these are exactly the things that take place in the modern school. Roland Barthes claimed that: "All official institutions are *repeating machines*: schools, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words."²³ It is perhaps not incidental, then, that public education and the term "cliché" itself emerged around the same time and place. As former students,

all of us are familiar with listening to endless repetitions in the classroom, and those of us who are, or were, school teachers are also familiar with being inclined to speak in repetitions day after day, year after year. Yes, schools, curricula, and students do change. Yet as a former high school teacher myself, I remember quite vividly the frustration of conveying the same meaning in a repeated same structure, and, more often than not, by using the same words. In conclusion to this point, the pressure of practice and the centrality of the school as a repeating machine ultimately make educational clichés almost unavoidable.

Another possible reason for the abundance of clichés in education, one that is closely connected to the practicality of education, could be found in the increasing influence of the managerial approach. According to this explanation, clichés did not originally emerge from educational discourse but were “imported” with the adoption of the managerial vision into schools and higher education. In an interesting article on clichés in management literature, Stefano Harney claims that the use of clichés is not merely strategic (gaining consent from listeners, gaining professional prestige, etc.) but also symptomatic of the new challenges management as a profession and a field faces. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Harney says that traditionally management had a *recording* function – accounting for labor and its cost, and a *miraculating* function – presenting capital as self-expanding and not as rising from labor. Since the increase of immaterial labor has made the measurement of labor – the recording function of management – extremely difficult (how much does it cost to produce a software designer?) – it leans more heavily on its miraculating characteristic, and it does that through clichés. Specifically, it claims to be responsible for work and profits that existed before management ever took place. And this is exactly how cliché works, for “to claim to produce something already in circulation is to produce a cliché. But what else can management do when it arrives so late? ... Left to repeat what is already completed, management can only utter the cliché, however, manically.”²⁴

I believe it is not only that education is influenced by the adoption of the managerial view, but that it also faces a similar challenge. Comparing (perhaps a little too simplistically) labor to learning, we can say that if in the past educa-

tionalists could claim that learning took place mainly in the school (like labor mainly happened in the workplace), with the recent rise of new informational technologies, this is no longer the case. Frustrated and intimidated by a possible further decline in status, teachers and researchers then claim to produce learning that is actually already there, and again, this is exactly what speaking a cliché is - claiming the production of something new, when in fact, it already exists.

Finally, compared to other practices and research fields, education is uniquely future-oriented. While being commonly conceived as a present “good-in-itself,” it is also aimed at future goods such as personal development, profession, social standing, and economic status. And not only is the educator is occupied with the future, she must also view it favorably. She makes a promise, and she is optimistic about its fulfillment. Since losing optimism when educating is considered a failure, anything that might threaten it must be put aside, and clichés, as we saw earlier, are excellent figures of speech for doing just that. In face of the genuinely difficult task of following promises made to a child, doubts and insecurities that might arise from facing reality are excluded by the repeated utterance of a cliché, leaving the teacher, scholar or policy maker perhaps more confident, but only deceptively so.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS RESISTING CLICHÉS

Disposing of clichés altogether is probably impossible. Every discursive community requires, in addition to exchange of ideas and transformation of content, agreements that are obvious and unreflective. Clichés are needed to our daily interactions, and much like institutions, they are essential to the functioning of society. To some extent, however, clichés can be exposed and resisted. In pointing to a way of doing this, I return to Arendt, this time to the decisions she makes as the writer of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. I suggest that the clever name of the book implies more than usually understood. The full name of the book (originally a series of articles in *The New Yorker*) is *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, and, of course, we all know about the banality of evil, which turned into one of the more annoying, and dangerous, moral clichés. I find interesting the “report” part of the title. *Reporting*,

commonly considered as far from creativity and as primarily passive, is taken by Arendt to be an intellectual practice that requires both loyalty to the facts and their constant critique. Since no immediate knowledge is available for us, besides the “knowledge” provided by clichés and other thoughtless expressions, and because the facts do not “speak for themselves,” thinking and speech must be active, creative and imaginative in order for moral judgment to take place. In her report, Arendt relentlessly questions common language, and without having a clear analytical approach (at least, without announcing one) she critiques, and criticizes, almost every moral and political concept that plays part in the trial – law, state, citizenship, order, collaboration, evil, resistance, justice, legitimacy. These concepts are destabilized by her up to the point where none of them could be easily defined and agreed upon unreflectively. The artificial safety Eichmann surrounds himself with by using clichés, and the certainty that the court promised to deliver through appropriate legal procedure, are destroyed by Arendt, who keeps on asking difficult questions. These questions (which indeed disturbed many people, organizations and states) could be rightly seen as the exact opposite of the cliché – where one delivers immediate, thoughtless agreement, the other creates harsh dissensus; where one shuts down conversation, the other generates a discourse that goes on till this day; and where one runs away in fear from reality, the other embraces it.

We can rightly see Arendt’s report as an excellent exercise in thinking and talking about a topic, not in a way that is totally free from regulation and repetition, but in a way that is at least aware of the characteristics of speech and of its functions. Applying Arendt’s non-methodical approach to educational phenomena is sure to create confusion and uncertainty. It will be, however, a necessary first step towards freeing educational discourse from banality. Philosophy of education, aware and critical of its own speech, has an important part in taking this step.

1 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006).

- 2 Ruth Amossy, "The Cliché in the Reading Process," *SubStance* 11, no. 2, Issue 35 (1982): 34-35.
- 3 Ibid., 35.
- 4 Anton C. Zijderfeld, *On clichés: The Supersedure of Meaning by Function in Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1979), 12.
- 5 Stefano Harney, "Why is Management a Cliché?," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 16 (2005), 581.
- 6 Although not an onomatopoeia, the word *stereotype* originated in a similar way. First, it represented a new printing technique (the English version this time), and only later achieved its metaphoric status.
- 7 Robert J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1963), 429.
- 8 Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 5-6.
- 9 Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Clichés* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.
- 10 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 47-48.
- 11 George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (Horizon: London, 1946).
- 12 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 47-48.
- 13 Ibid., 54.
- 14 Ibid., 116.
- 15 Eichmann's last words: "After a short while, gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them." Ibid., 231-232.
- 16 Ibid., 44.
- 17 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.
- 18 Zijderfeld, *On Clichés*, 26.
- 19 David F. Labaree, "Progressivism, Schools and Schools of Education: An American Romance," in *Pedagogica Historica* 41, no. 1-2 (2005), 278.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 287.
- 22 John Walton, "Clichés and Metaphors in the Study of Education," *The School Review* 80, no. 1 (Nov., 1971), 78-79.
- 23 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974), 40. Emphasis added.
- 24 Harney, "Why is Management a Cliché?," 589.