



Conversing with Friends or (Higher) Education Beyond the Logic of Production

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard¹ · Piotr Zamojski²

Accepted: 3 February 2023 / Published online: 18 March 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

In this paper, we will propose an idea of education as conversations between friends on matters of common concern. In a scholarly and pedagogical climate of competition, testing and accountability, there seems to be little room for true pedagogical and scholarly conversation. What we aim to develop here, is a vocabulary that is able to capture some educational experiences that are being repressed in the current educational and academic discourse and practice. Starting from our own experiences as higher education workers, we argue for a way of speaking about educational practices that focus on the matters of common concern that gather – and put into conversation - students and teachers. We call this conversation a studious discourse so as to distinguish it from other forms of conversation and outline a definition of the kinds of friendships that potentially revolve around this form of communication. We base our argument on a reading of Jürgen Oelkers and Martin Wagenschein’s pedagogical and didactical reflections and propose ultimately that education is not about the inner development of measurable skills or competences, but rather about becoming part of particular forms of communication about matters of common concern.

Keywords Educational communication · Logic of production · Wagenschein · Studious discourse · Higher education

‘Cicero and I spent ten tranquil, leisurely days together; and I think he enjoyed his stay and liked my company.’

Petrarch (some 1400 years after Cicero’s death).

✉ Morten Timmermann Korsgaard
morten.korsgaard@mau.se

Piotr Zamojski
p.zamojski@amw.gdynia.pl

¹ Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

² Department of Educational Studies, Polish Naval Academy, Gdynia, Poland

Introduction

The poet Jean Paul once remarked that books are thick letters to friends. Peter Sloterdijk (2009) has built on this idea to claim that theoretical discourse is in essence simply this. Letters to and from friends who try to make sense of human existence. In the publish or perish age, most of us will see this as a fairly naïve idea, and academic discourse is increasingly understood in competitive terms rather than conversational ones. The academic discourses of researchers are measured and valued in terms of impact, and student discourses in terms of results on exams and all of these added up in high stakes national and international comparisons. Working and studying in higher education institutions has become a competitive game in which we are valued not in terms of what we contribute to the ongoing conversation about human and non-human existence, but in terms of what impact we have on arbitrary scales of measurement.

In this light, the (higher education) student, has been increasingly individualized and academic work instrumentalized in a restrictive and alienating way, where the aims and the instruments applied to achieve them has created an unfriendly and competitive environment. In this environment conversations with and letters to friends have no part, and colleagues and fellow students are seen more as competitors for positions and prestige than as friends with whom we communicate about matters of common concern.

In this paper, we want to argue that this is not merely the consequence of neo-liberal accountability discourses but is in fact also connected to the intellectual history of education, and especially to the ‘discovery’ of the student (and the pupil) as an object of development and/or influence, that is amenable to measurement. Building on Jürgen Oelkers’ analysis of Locke and Rousseau’s influence on educational theory, we will argue that a particular definition of the student as an object has been promulgated in educational theory, and that this has skewed the gaze towards an individualized and instrumentalizing understanding of what (higher) education is about.

Although the inspiration for the argument developed below comes from our experiences as academic teachers, following Oelkers’ analysis leads us to a more general claim about education, regardless of whether it’s practiced at school or at the university. We believe this transition in our thinking points to the fact that increasingly what university teachers are supposed to engage in is not education, but a process of producing particular qualities in humans enrolled by the university as students – an experience we share also with school-teachers working under the regime of accountability (cf. Hangartner 2019; Jerrim & Sims 2022). Indeed, our intention is to give a preliminary account of a position conceptualizing education beyond the logic of production processes.

Hence, in the second part of the paper, we will make an attempt at formulating such an alternative, by developing Oelkers’ conception of moral communication in connection with Martin Wagenschein’s concept of *Einstieg*. We will argue that what we want to call educational communication, understood as a way of entering a studious community of friendly discourse, should never be lost from sight when thinking or practicing education.

Importantly, in the course of this argument to educate is to engage into a conversation among friends (these being distant in time, as well as present here and now). We use the word ‘conversation’ deliberately. Although, at least since Michael Oakeshott (1962) the meaning of this term is reduced to some light and playful form of human communication, we note that apart from opposing conversation to inquiry, debate, and discovery, Oakeshott

defined it as an “unrehearsed intellectual adventure” (p. 198). He goes on claiming that since the “primeval forests”, throughout the centuries, taking place between various interlocutors a conversation is the substance of our inheritance (p. 199). Of course, Oakeshott’s conservative understanding of conversation is not without problems, and belongs to what Harvey and Moten would place alongside what “goes on upstairs, in polite company, among the rational men.” (Harney & Moten 2013, p. 26). Although we side with neither the conservative nor the radical, what is most striking is perhaps the fact that to anyone, conservative or otherwise, who wishes to enter scholarly conversation, to write letters to friends, “it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and [...] one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can” (Ibid). The notion of educational communication we wish to argue for here, is thus not so much a harking back to conservative ideals of specific forms of knowledge being instilled in specific kinds of humans, but the act of engaging in a studious conversation on matters of concern (See also Masschelein, 2019). The studious conversation we aim to outline is not one of reverence to what has come before, but rather a back and forth, where we join in conversation with the past and the present in a way that both potentially come to life anew. This double nature of the conversation, as something taking place between friends in the present and with friends long departed, is wonderfully captured in the introduction to the volume *Conversations*, on the intertextuality between classical and renaissance poetry, by Syrithe Pugh. We quote at length:

Our title, *Conversations*, is chosen in part to commemorate the animated and illuminating conversation enjoyed at the original symposium, and long into the evening, between those represented here and other friends now absent. It also has several other intended connotations. Firstly, it is meant to convey a sense of literary imitation as a lively process of give and take, as the poets discussed here read and respond to one another’s words, and the allusive text takes on the character of an interplay of voices, with memories and echoes of the old heard afresh and given a new turn, like a kind of reply or series of replies both from and through the later writer. Secondly, beyond the individual poets, it evokes the broader conversation between the ages, cultures, world-views and languages, as poets self-consciously adapt an ancient original and adjust its meaning, reflecting on the different conditions which pertain to their own time and circumstances, and sometimes drawing on the voices and the values of the past in an attempt to change the present (Pugh, 2020, p. 1).

It is thus in the spirit of such an intertextual and interpersonal understanding of scholarly conversation, that we undertake to unfold our argument here.

Influence and Development

One of the most recurrent debates in educational theory is between proponents of the idea that children and young people should be allowed to develop and unfold without overzealous external influence, on the one hand, and proponents of the idea that children are more or less a blank canvas upon which the older generation should imprint the right values and character traits, on the other. Jürgen Oelkers (1994) has described influence and development theories of education as the two basic paradigms of educational theory. The main pro-

tagonist of the development paradigm is Rousseau while Locke is identified as the ‘father’ of the influence paradigm. What is of particular interest here is the analysis Oelkers offers of the similarities between the two paradigms and the consequences they – irrespective of whether they are in fact faithful to Locke and Rousseau’s ideas – have had on educational theory.

The point of departure for the analysis is a shift in the view on what constitutes the “inner world” of human existence. Oelkers argues that Locke instantiates such a significant shift in emphasis with his theory of habits and influence. By claiming that children arrive as a ‘*tabula rasa*’ Locke essentially rejected the idea of the eternal soul that was somehow beyond habits and personal traits.

Instead, habits and reason were placed at the inner most core of human existence, and with this a new era in educational theory was heralded: ““educational” is something happening between persons that constructs inner (mental) states from the outside” (p. 96). This break with the Christian-platonic conception of the inner life, opened a new perspective on what pedagogical processes can amount to and what can be achieved through influence upon the inner life of a young person. Previously the soul was something taken to be nothing more than an image (remember that the root of the German *Bildung*, is *Bild*, i.e., an image) of God. With the soul liberated from this fixed image new educational possibilities come to the fore: one can shape the inner world of another human being, and so the inner states of a human being can somehow become observable, which “...makes the objectives of education seem attainable and it describes exactly how to reach them, namely by forming the mind through calculated and continuous influence so that it meets the external expectations” (p. 97). A teacher aims to shape the inner life of a child so as to attain the previously established objectives with effective and controllable means.

Of course, this all hinges on the idea of the greatest deficit of all, namely the young person’s mind as a ‘*tabula rasa*’. This great deficit, however, also opens to boundless opportunities. If nothing is in the mind, then everything can be brought into it, and the limits of pedagogy become vastly expanded. Every detail of a child’s upbringing becomes an object for intentional influence, and thus the whole expanse of becoming human is put under the sway of pedagogy. The teacher’s role becomes - in the scope of Locke’s ideas - to impart upon the inner world of the child the appropriate ‘*Virtue, Wisdom, Breeding and Learning*’, through the exercise of reason. The teacher is tasked with being an exemplar of the proper forms of reasoning and with exhibiting in their conduct with the child the character traits that the child is to develop.

The omnipotence of pedagogy is carried over into Rousseau’s ideas on the upbringing of *Emile*, albeit with a different emphasis, and a slightly different and much more withdrawn role outlined for the teacher. It is nature that drives *Emile*, and it is nature that is the means by which the pedagogue must construct the environment in which *Emile* can develop. The maxim of natural education “is formulated directly in opposition to Locke” (p. 98). Instead of the emphasis on reason as the driving pedagogical force, nature becomes both the ‘engine’ and the aim of education. “Nature is a self-acting force in man, it develops itself, and the art of education consists in following its track” (p. 98). *Emile*’s nature is what drives him to become who he is, and nature is the method that structures the pedagogical process and milieu. “That is the key to the construction of *Emile*: (...) *Emile* is in fact “*toujours maitre de lui*” because he has achieved the optimum of his nature” (p. 99). This entails that although Rousseau rejects original sin and the idea that children are born good or bad,

they are not a tabula rasa. They arrive with nature, and this nature unfolds into a proper man if provided with the right 'natural' conditions in the early years. Only after the child's nature has settled into its (natural) form, can we begin to engage with reason and human idea(l)s.

Just as the idea of influence is at the heart of modern ideals of education with an emphasis on reason and acquisition of proper habits and moral characteristics; "[t]he stylization of a child's nature into the beginning of man, from which all that follows develops, is the basis for child-centered pedagogics, which has adopted Rousseau's strong antithesis to Locke as its basic maxim" (p. 99). These two basic paradigms form the basis of modern educational theories across the spectrum, because they are the origin of the idea that education and upbringing are processes that can be controlled and that they essentially are processes of bringing about inner states that can somehow be observed and evaluated. According to Oelkers, this leads to a certain impasse in debates about the aims and forms of education (p. 100), which hinges on the radical 'opening' of the inner world of human existence by Locke. An opening that carried over into Rousseau's critique of Locke's overemphasis on reason as the primary pedagogical force. "Both presuppose a distinct and demarcated inner space which can open up or close itself to the outside" (p. 101). However, this opening is a mere fiction, and the metaphors of influence and development as central to education are misleading. As Oelkers puts it:

The wellmeaning tutor arranges the natural worlds of learning so that an ideal correspondence between the inner development and the didactic offers of the milieu develops. This is just as much a fiction as the idea of a construction of the inner world in accordance with the aims, - a construction that has been promoted by pedagogical sensualism up to this day be (sic.) adhering to the formula that education is the promotion or the strengthening of "inner" *dispositions*. But no matter how the "inner space" is described psychologically, it is not *transparent* (cf. Luhmann/Schorr 1986) and thus not available (p. 102).

There are two distinct yet interconnected issues at play here. First is the idea that education is a process of influencing or developing inner states that can somehow be directed towards more or less ideal states. Whether the ideal is the rational or the natural man, it is a conception of education and upbringing as a linear and ultimately limited process with a specific aim the progress towards which can be somehow observed and evaluated. It is in essence a theory of approximation that is, "still fundamental for all public claims and expectations with regard to education" (p. 102). Second, is the idea that we can understand the inner world of human existence as some form of more or less observable entity or core that we can identify and quantify as a singular and unique 'I' (p. 103). Oelkers' rejection of the idea of a singular entity in the inner world of human existence that can be observably influenced or developed, has radical consequences for the way we conceive of education and upbringing. Not only does it challenge the omni-present accountability discourse, but it also challenges many of the alternative and critical perspectives on education. By rejecting the idea that education and upbringing concerns bringing about desired inner states through intentional processes of influence or development, Oelkers at the very least tells us that the proposed link between an educational intention and its intended effect is not the proper measure for education. This very relation is suspended if we accept his analysis of the two basic paradigms and their impact on educational theory.

Before turning to the alternative Oelkers offers us by proposing moral communication as the basis for education and our intention to connect this idea with Wagenschein, we want to turn our attention briefly to the effect the paradigms have had on the student.

The Student: Empty Vessel or Nature's Child

The two basic paradigms discussed above have led to vastly different conceptions of the role of the teacher and the student in educational theory. One has led to ideas about knowledge and subjects where the transmission of specific content and values has been central, and the teacher has been tasked with instilling these in the students in the form of the right kind(s) of learning. The other has led to a figure of the teacher as someone who stands on the side and facilitates the learning process through indirect guidance and establishing of conducive student-led/student-centered learning environments.¹ These figures herald from the paradigms of influence and development, and lines can be drawn directly to the influence of Locke and Rousseau on educational theory as Oelkers shows. On the one hand, we have a paradigm that conceives of the student as a person in need of instruction and values. Instruction and values to be given directly from the teacher or the academic tradition into which the student seeks entrance. The student then, is the recipient of forms of knowledge necessary for understanding and becoming proficient in a discipline or tradition. The educational institution tries to influence the student's inner states and to form in them habits that are conducive to acquiring the necessary forms of knowledge. These in turn can be measured by ascertaining what knowledge and skills have been acquired by the individual student. All this, of course, sounds fairly obvious and reasonable. However, the problem is, as progressives have shown time and again, that the student is turned into a passive object of the influences of the educational system, being therefore reified as a human material to be processed according to a plan designed beforehand. Even if conceived as a more active agent the student is still barred from real influence upon the process, because the values and the forms of knowledge worthwhile pursuing have already been determined. Or as Ivan Illich bluntly put it some 50 years ago: "In a schooled world the road to happiness is paved with a consumer's index" (Illich 1970, p 40). The student at most becomes a consumer of the values inherent in the existing society, under the sway of the pressures of employability and testing.

On the other hand, we have the paradigm handed down to us from Rousseau, via Dewey and other progressives - in more or less qualified versions - of development unhindered by direct instruction and traditions. In this paradigm, the student is to be set free from the constraints of traditional teaching, and what has been called the transmission model of teaching (Kohlberg and Mayer 1972). We move from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning and student-led/student-centered activities. Through active engagement with problems in a conducive learning environment the students will themselves be able to identify and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully master a subject or a discipline. This, again, sounds reasonable and obvious on the face of it. However, the same issue of the student as someone who is in the process of developing specific inner states that can somehow be measured and accounted for emerges. This is perhaps most evident in the seemingly omni-present idea of constructive alignment, where the student

¹ For an accomplished outline of the varying figures of good teachers see Tubbs (2006).

through clear objectives and a set amount of learning outcomes is brought through a process of acquisition of predetermined habits. Again, particular inner states as the predetermined ends are enforced upon students, only here these are not directly installed in them, but it is the specially designed learning environment that leads students towards these ends. In this way, what at first sight might seem to be a part of a liberal-romantic educational imaginary (putting students learning in the center, stressing learner's activity and free will, etc.) is in fact strongly connected with the grip of standardized course-models, instrumental learning activities and an increasing sense of being alienated from the actual matters of common concern (Biesta 2017; Rytzler & Magnusson 2019). Once again, the students are forced into patterns designed for them a priori. Although it seems they are the agents of their own learning, still it is already known where this learning should take them, how they should be changed, what qualities they should present, what inner states this whole process should produce. In the case of university education this – moreover – means being excluded from the actual academic conversation, i.e. from the living knowledge emerging from research and study practices, and simultaneously it means being exposed to learning activities that are instrumental for the job market, but not instrumental in becoming 'part of the conversation'.

Studious Discourse and the Role of Friendship

We will, as promised, now turn to Oelkers' alternative of moral communication and an outline of why it is insufficient for the alternative we wish to present. Oelkers argues that what sets educational endeavours apart are not the specific nature of the content, or any intentional shaping or facilitated development of specific inner states in the learner. Rather, education is marked out by being a space where symmetry breaks down and morality thus enters the frame. The symmetry is broken by there being present a person with a not-necessarily identified sense of a lack, i.e. wanting to gain entrance to a sphere of life hitherto unknown to him or her. As such, educative spaces are spaces of potential entrance. This is not to say that education is merely the handing on of a particular canon or the transmission of specific values that must be reproduced. It is to say that to become part of a conversation is what is hoped for and that this involves moral communication about the bounds and borders of the very conversation itself. "By 'moral communication' I mean processes of negotiating of convincing which deal with "morality", i.e. with normative demarcations within the framework of social groups" (Oelkers 1994, p. 103). Moral communication thus, is the dialogical demarcation of the normative bounds of a given social group and the conversation it is engaged in.

Although Oelkers proposition effectively moves the scope of educational theory beyond the Locke- Rousseau frame, we believe his concept of moral communication is too narrow, on two distinctive accounts: (1) it limits educational communication to situations where the bounds and borders of the given subject are in question, and (2) it excludes education from taking place between equals, and hence between friends. Picking up the thread Oelkers suggested we wish to offer instead the idea of studious discourse and educational communication. Studious discourse takes place when there are things from the world people care about so much, they engage in the ongoing conversation about them. It happens when we meet in order to investigate together what is the meaning of a thing, what is its essence, how it works, how it is composed, what are its key features, etc. This discourse is timeless, as it

entails writing and receiving long letters to/from friends we shall never know (or have never met), friends living in distant times and foreign places. And this is precisely a conversation one takes up when engaging in scholarly studies, but also at school when exploring something together in a classroom.

Naturally, this does not preclude that at school as well as in the university we engage in the process of negotiating the bounds and borders of what counts as a worldly thing to be investigated. What counts as a matter of our common concern and study? What is important enough to capture our attention and become the object of our studies? What is worthwhile such an effort? Transposed to the school and the university, the idea of moral communication points to specifically educational kinds of communication on the bounds and borders of a specific subject matter and the inquiry itself. As such it can be understood as the communication about how to understand a given subject and why we should understand it in particular ways. Hence moral communication as Oelkers defines it is a much narrower concept.

In this light, schools, and universities function as spaces of entrance into studious discourses. Our intention as teachers is to introduce our students to the conversation ongoing in a particular field of study (whether it is biology of viruses, conceptual art, polar expeditions, or something else) and to entice them to engage in it.

For this, we want to argue, friendship can be seen as both a prerequisite and a potential outcome of educational processes. On the one hand, because most university workers have experienced how they develop various kinds of friendship, ranging from the friendship one develops to thinkers and researchers, past and present, that as Arendt – who we regard as a close friend – would say ultimately determines “our decisions about right and wrong” (Arendt 2003, p. 145–146), to friendship developing out of educational encounters with students, such as those between a doctoral student and his/her supervisor over time. This of course does not preclude disagreement and sharp criticism, hence Popper’s description of scholarly relations as “the friendly-hostile cooperation of scientists” (Popper 1994, p. 93). On the other hand, because the studious discourse is also dependent on the bonds of friendship between students. Not that friendship is a necessary condition or can be seen as a demand on students (that “you must be friends!”) or an educational aim, but because studious discourse if taken in the sense we wish to impart, is first and foremost a form of communication on matters of common concern. And precisely this feature is often highlighted in definitions of friendship (Emmeche 2015). In a first distinction of friendship from mere companionship and love, C.S. Lewis² points to this precise feature.

The Companionship was between people who were doing something together, hunting, studying, painting or what you will. The Friends will still be doing something together, but something more inward, less widely shared and less easily defined; still hunters, but of some immaterial quarry; still collaborating, but in some work the world does not, or not yet, take account of; still travelling companions, but on a different kind of journey. Hence we picture lovers face to face but Friends side by side; their eyes look ahead (Lewis 1960, p. 98).

The image of friends being not so much occupied with themselves as individuals, hence looking ahead, points to the idea that friendship more often than not is based, at least initially, on some shared interest. A return to Arendt, will perhaps shed further light on this.

² In an otherwise hugely problematic and even misogynist text.

The friendships Arendt developed and sustained through near impossible conditions³ bear witness to the concern with the objects and events of common concern, and the care for the world and the other entailed in the sustained conversations that are the heart of any friendship. In fact, it is only in this kind of conversation that the world truly appears to us.

If someone wants to see and experience the world as it ‘really’ is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk about it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides (Arendt 2005, p. 128).

These initial remarks probably feel familiar to scholars and university workers, whereas these are not usually the kinds of descriptions of friendship and conversation one encounters in descriptions of what takes place in schools. And of course, there is the immediate challenge that a teacher-pupil relation is not one of friendship and the kinds of conversation that goes on in classrooms is not often of the kind undertaken by Arendt in her correspondence with friends. However, also in secondary and primary education people gather around something interesting, surprising, important, being hooked (Felski 2020) by it, and make a collaborative attempt at understanding it, i.e. they engage in a studious discourse. Before we develop this further permit us first a literary example that shows how a teacher can initiate such a conversation through placing something ‘on the table’ and trying to rouse a common interest for this thing, i.e. to open the world for his pupils. The example is from the Danish novel *The Liar* which take place on the small Danish Island of Sandø, where Johannes teaches a small group of the island’s children. He does this in a constant tension between having to teach them about the island and to prepare them for their likely future on it, while at the same time allowing the wider world into the classroom and their lives. The example we have chosen is one where Johannes is employing his so-called tomfoolery of placing things on display in the classroom without naming them, knowing full well how they will draw the attention of the children.

“Come and sit here in the corner!” I said. We all sat on the floor in the corner of the schoolroom, with the dog sledge in the middle of us, and off we went – thousands of miles!

The sun makes the schoolroom sultry. There is a smell of smoldering peat, stuffed birds and dried marine animals from the museum over our heads – a hanging press of strange things found on land and sea – and a smell of rye bread, fat, and cold meat from the open mouths of the children. Their mouths are open, you know, because we are off on a long journey, and the mouth, as the doorway of the imagination, must stay open when the mind travels. . We are in North Greenland with Mylius Erichsen, Hagen, and Brönlund on their last journey in the ice-waste ... When I sent the children home, the fate of these men had so impressed them that they filed out quietly. Soon after, I heard them storming along the slushy road with wild shouts of joy. I, too, felt refreshed after the journey (Hansen, 1986, pp. 56–57).

³ Arendt’s correspondence with Karl Jaspers is of particular interest here. See also Nixon (2015).

Johannes takes the children upon a journey and opens the world of polar exploration for them. One that may well in some of the children awaken a deep interest in exploration, and even sneak its way into their play and friendly activities outside of the classroom. It becomes part of their world, a part around which they can continue to gather in order to discuss and explore it further. And out of such gathering, friendships develop and are sustained. Of course, this way of conceiving of education, immediately introduces a problem because it is difficult to ask about its observable and measurable results. As Oelkers comments:

communication cannot control whether the effects actually ensue, because all assumptions of effectiveness surpass the communicative situation. For this reason, there is always a hiatus between intention and effect (...) communication does not result in a single specific, as it were, purposive ‘impact’. The effects are diffuse, they diverge according to the respective biographical digestion of experiences and do not culminate in a remote target state (1994, p. 103–104).

We cannot determine in advance the effects that engagement in a studious discourse will have on students (or pupils), nor can we guarantee that they will take on the conversation as we had imagined, nor even if they will enter it at all. Educational situations are spaces of both potentiality and impotentiality as Tyson Lewis (2013; 2020) has argued, and therefore they always involve the risk of their results being different from what we may have imagined. Before trying to define and develop what it is that we do in educational situations, we must see that these first and foremost consist of studious discourse, something that happens *hic et nunc* between people. It is not facilitated development of specific inner states. It is not a production process. Rather, it is a specific communicative practice: something that people do when they explore a thing together. Thus, we must also abandon the idea that educational practices are concerned first and foremost with acquiring learning objectives or the acquisition of specific skills and forms of knowledge. Educational practices are in essence a form of communication that opens a space of potential entrance into the ongoing conversation in a field of study, a studious discourse about a particular matter, a part of our common world. Accordingly, we will now turn to the concept of *Einstieg* as developed by Martin Wagenschein in order to give flesh to what this idea of entrance might entail.

Einstieg

In his seminal paper ‘Zum Begriff des exemplarischen Lehrens’⁴ Martin Wagenschein gives a scathing account of what he calls systematic teaching. This he defines as the idea that education is the chronological and systematic acquisition of a form of knowledge by following a so-called learning ladder, i.e. the progression from the simple to the complex. This is of course a logical supposition, since things often tend to build on each other, and sequences of events follow a chronological order. However, the fact that systematic teaching is logical does not make it pedagogical. In fact, according to Wagenschein, this method will at worst lead to students losing interest along the way, and at best to the acquisition of an imposing pile of rubbish [einen imposanten Schotterhaufen] (1956, p. 2). This is because they “pursue

⁴ There are some omissions and irregularities in the English translation of Wagenschein’s text, so we have added the original quotes in the footnotes for clarity.

a vision of the whole subject” (2010, p. 162),⁵ and hence neglect the moment of becoming interested as central to true learning and education (*Bildung*). The systematic approach fails to see the whole child/student, and thus neglects the formative aspects of education.

Without wanting to dismiss the value of gaining knowledge in a systematic way, and the fact that certain steps are necessary in acquiring knowledge of a subject, Wagenschein maintains that the idea of moving from the simple to the complex is flawed as a primary principle. Often, what is simple is “either not simple at all, or it is trivial” (p. 162).⁶ When complex or even trivial yet important things become mere steps on a ladder or servings in a beginners book they lose their inherent ability to capture the imagination.

A course of teaching of this kind brings no long-range motivation for the learner. It encourages only the anxious upwards glance to the higher levels, as yet unknown, but already a burden (the fact that they are known to the teacher makes them no less of a burden). The student wonders what the teacher intends; the teacher begins by telling the students what the class is about to do (p. 163).⁷

Bildung, according to Wagenschein, is not a process of adding up. Such an approach will neglect both the student and the subject matter, and “being a teacher means being conscious of the developing, the waking intellect. And being a subject teacher means at the same time being conscious of the developed and the developing subject matter” (p. 162).⁸

In contradistinction to the systematic approach Wagenschein argues for *the exemplary way* [Das exemplarische Verfahren]. This is not the induction into the canonical content and the exemplary figures of a given subject, but rather the selecting and organizing of a set of examples that best function as entryways [Einstieg] into a subject matter. Again, as was the case with Oelkers, this is not with the aim of simply acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge in order to produce the desired qualities of a subject, rather it is to be introduced to the conversation and its varied perspectives. Or as Wagenschein – a physics scholar – put it, *to learn to think as a physics scholar* (1956, p. 6). Focusing on the notion of Einstieg, requires that first we give a brief account of Wagenschein’s theory of exemplarity. The first tenet of this theory is that it is better to have the courage to leave the so-called learning ladder in order to *grow roots* and *dig deep* into a specific problem or issue in a given subject, than it is to rush along in order to accumulate knowledge. The second is that the individual example is not merely a step on the way to other pieces of knowledge more an isolated island in a sea of other problems and pieces of knowledge. Rather an example, if chosen well, contains within itself the whole of the subject as a ‘mundus in guta’. “The individual [example] is a focal point, admittedly only *one*, but one in which the whole is borne. In this sense, the individual does not accumulate, but bears and illuminates the whole; it does not lead away from the whole but enlightens it. Through resonance it excites further, related

⁵ “Sie sehen das fertige Fach und im Grund nicht das Kind, sondern den fertigen Menschen, den Erwachsenen vor sich, nur im Kleinformat, nur quantitativ noch “beschränkt in der Auffassungsgabe.” (p. 2).

⁶ P. “Sehr oft ist das “Einfache” entweder gar nicht einfach, oder es ist trivial.” (p. 2).

⁷ “Ein solcher Lehrgang hat also für den Lernenden keinen Antrieb auf längere Zeit hin. Er enthält nur den sorgenvollen Aufblick auf kommende unbekannte aber schon lastende Stockwerke (für den Lehrer bekannte, doch deshalb nicht weniger lastende). Der Schüler denkt: was wird der Lehrer wohl heute vorhaben? Der Lehrer beginnt: Heute wollen wir mal folgendes machen!” (p. 2).

⁸ “Aber Lehrer sein heißt: Sinn haben für den werdenden, den erwachenden Geist. Und Fachlehrer sein heißt: zugleich Sinn haben für das gewordene und werdende Fach.” (p. 2).

knowledge” (p. 165).⁹ What is important to note here, is that Wagenschein is not merely making an epistemological point about the relation between part and whole, which would in as sense be somewhat problematic since this supposed linear relation between the particular and the general has been questioned (See Harvey, 2012). It is a pedagogical point. The part, the individual, is an example where the relation to the whole is explicit, yet not necessarily unproblematic. The object of the exercise is to entice curiosity and the urge for further exploration through the discovery that things stand in relation to each other. This is connected with Wagenschein’s definition of *Bildung*, because “in the physical as in the moral world, the fact that things never stand in isolation inspires confidence in the world and is thus an educative or formative (*bildend*) experience” (p. 169).¹⁰ The notion of confidence in the world [*Weltvertrauen*] is central here, because it alludes to the fact, that for Wagenschein *Bildung* is not something one acquires, but essentially an experience of becoming part of something, where we can come to feel at home. Not in a localistic or nationalistic sense of belonging, but in the educational sense of becoming genuinely interested in a part of the world and coming to feel acquainted with it. For Wagenschein, this is what the exemplary way should lead to. A stepping into [*Einstieg*] a subject matter and by extension into the world as a common space of exploration and ongoing conversation.

Einstieg is for Wagenschein a particular formative moment and experience in which a student acquires on the one hand something new and on the other a sense of trust or confidence in a sphere of human existence. It is a stepping into something, and thus a form of acting, but at the same time it is something that happens to us. Wagenschein invents the term “*Widerfährnis*” for what he has in mind, since he finds no other adequate word for it (1956, p. 7). What he aims to highlight is the insecurity of the term, as well as the active and passive aspects of it. It is something that befalls us at the same time as we are actively moved to take a step forward into the hitherto unknown. It is important to note that the relation of the individual and the whole does not merely have to do with the example and the subject matter. It also has to do with the student. “The reflection must not only reflect the whole of the subject matter – in the most favorable case the whole of the intellectual world – it must also illuminate the whole of the learner (and not simply, e.g. the intelligence)” (p. 166).¹¹

Einstieg and *Weltvertrauen* – for Wagenschein the pillars of *Bildung* – are thus not merely matters of the mind, but affect the whole of the learner. They are bodily as well as intellectual experiences that grip us and change us profoundly. Wagenschein even refers to it as being grippingly gripped by something. This is essential for the metaphor of *Einstieg*. It has to do with the fact that we step onto a platform, in the form of an example, not in order to quickly progress to the next one, but in order to linger, to grow roots, and become gripped by the experience of being with the subject matter. This could not be more at odds with the practices enacted in education through the logic of production. Where there are

⁹ “Die Beziehung, die das Einzelne hier zum Ganzen hat, ist nicht die des Teiles, der Stufe, der Vorstufe, sondern sie ist von der Art des Schwerpunktes, der zwar einer ist, in dem aber das Ganze getragen wird. Dieses Einzelne häuft nicht, es trägt, es erhellt; es leitet nicht fort, sondern es strahlt an. Es erregt das Fernere, doch Verwandte, durch Resonanz.” (p. 4).

¹⁰ “Man sollte auch wissen, wie diese Dinge zusammenhängen. Nicht nur, um sie dann besser auf einen Gedächtnisfaden reihen zu können, sondern weil es eine *Weltvertrauen* erweckende und damit bildende Erfahrung ist, dass, wie der Physiker TYNDALL einmal sagt, die Dinge “in der physischen Welt wie in der moralischen nie vereinzelt dastehen”. (p. 7).

¹¹ “Die Spiegelung muss nicht nur das Ganze des Faches, – im günstigen Fall das Ganze der geistigen Welt –, sie muss auch das Ganze des Lernenden (nicht nur z. B. seine Intelligenz) erhellen.” (p. 5).

particular results to be achieved, or outcomes to be attained there is no time to lose, and one needs to be in a hurry. Going from one issue of a curriculum to another as fast as it is possible, to acquire more (knowledge, skills), to meet the planned objectives, is what keeps students and teachers away from being gripped by a matter. It literally takes away the possibility of lingering and growing roots into the studied thing. For Wagenschein, whether it is a mathematical equation, an experiment in physics, a piece of music or a poem, the aim is to become gripped by the example we aim to explore and to discover how it is connected to other examples in the subject.

This also entails that more than striving to go upwards, more often than not there is a need to ‘move downwards’ to find the solutions or the interpretation we need in order to dive further into the subject matter. Wagenschein mentions many examples of Einstieg; the Kepler ‘sunshine circle’ [sonnentaler] phenomenon, the way a plant stem reaching out of the water looks bent, the way a white stone placed in clear water on a dark background will seem to have coloured edges, the way a ray of light can illuminate dust particles in a dark room. In one example, he hung a large rock from a beam in the ceiling of his classroom in order to explore the movement of a pendulum with his pupils. The rock literally swinging above the heads of the pupils (Wagenschein 1977). All of these are entryways to complex problems in physics while at the same time being easily observable and conducive to capturing attention and awakening the imagination.

This will not lead us to a fixed canon of examples that can be applied as entryways, nor to “a universal ‘catalogue of exemplary matter.’ That would be the death of the process” (p. 169).¹² Rather, it leads us into the practice of communication that Oelkers was pointing to as a completely different way to approach education than the paradigms of development and intention. It leads us to a conversation about what is central, what moves us, what challenges us, what makes us insecure? What leads us not merely to some efficient, productive action, but to reflection and studious exploration in a joint conversation about the subject matter at hand?

The question that remains is whether we can imagine schools and universities leaving some room for education? Is it possible for educational institutions to let go of their productive logic, and give teachers and students the opportunity to enter the ongoing conversation of a studious discourse, to linger there, to grow roots, and become able to feel at home?

Concluding Remarks

As we mentioned in the introduction, the argument presented here is the result of our own struggles with being academic teachers in the environment marked by the logic of productivity and its derivatives (competitiveness, accountability, indexes, etc.). Naturally, the issues behind our own struggle have already gained much attention, and – sociologically speaking – are considered a global phenomenon (with variety of names: marketisation, neoliberalism, commodification, etc.). Oelkers’ analysis helps us to understand that these originate in a specific and old concept of education, that today has become almost hegemonic. This understanding renders education in terms of equipping students with particular functionalities (packages of knowledge, skills, and competencies). Following Oelkers, we tried to

¹² “einen allgemeingültigen “Katalog exemplarischer Stoffe” nach sich ziehen. Das wäre der Tod des Verfahrens.” (p. 8).

show that if education is about equipping students, that is, if education is about attaining goals, about efficiently acquiring specific habits and values and more recently about reaching predefined learning outcomes, then – regardless whether we take the path of external influence, or the path of enhancing the internal natural developmental dispositions – we will rely on the officially imposed curriculum with sets of required end-results (end-products) against which the work of teachers and students is measured, assessed, ranked, and turned into a competition. That is the framework of the logic of production. Perceiving education through these lenses is hegemonic today to the extent it almost feels unavoidable. As if there was no other way one can understand and experience education.

What we tried to do in this article was not to outline a completely new way to practice (higher) education. Instead of solving our own problems, we made an attempt to point to a few promising concepts that potentially could form a constellation, a horizon within which our common educational experiences would be re-framed beyond the logic of production, bringing back to our attention dimensions of these experiences that seem to be lost under the hegemonic view.

In that sense, there is no revelation, no new method, no new practical arrangements. These must always be discovered in collaboration with our colleagues and students in view of the individual examples that we choose as matters of common concern. At the university, or at school, even if being bound by an official curriculum aimed at altering the inner states of pupils/students, we are not simply equipping them with functionalities desired by the job market. We are introducing our students/pupils into a particular subject matter (an equation, a poem, a chemical reaction, a polar expedition), i.e. a part of our common world which has been, and continuously is being studied by others. Some of these others are around us (here in the classroom), some are not – but they were/are also gripped by this thing. When trying to come to terms with this matter (when exploring it, studying it) we start a conversation: an internal one (with ourselves), one with our colleagues and in the classroom, and – also inevitably – with those who made public their thoughts on the matter in the past. In the humanities and social sciences these usually take the form of long, thick letters. In sciences and mathematics these letters can be as short as a formula, a theorem. In the arts they can be paintings, artworks, and poems. These are prompts given to us by others who – like us – grappled with the matter.

As teachers we intuitively know that in order to introduce students/pupils to a particular matter (an equation, a poem, a chemical reaction, a polar expedition) we need a key, an entry point, an example that will work for us (teachers) and for these particular students/pupils. The matter at the start may seem inaccessible and silent, and we need to open it and give it a voice so that the young can enter the ongoing conversation about it.

When being in such a conversation we seem to think together, to discuss the thing with each other, and it may be the case that during such a studious discourse the matter will become interesting to us. The more we explore, the more exciting and important layers of the thing become visible. It is therefore not about rushing from there to yet another curriculum theme, but about lingering and growing roots. The object of study becomes part of the world for the students/pupils. Surely taking part in such an endeavor means that students/pupils learn a lot (of knowledge, skills, and competencies). However, this is not the end-product (not the aim and the reason), rather it is a by-product of being introduced to the common world.

And it is not unlikely that while making this effort we will find ourselves in the company of near and distant fellow discoverers and that have or will become our friends.

Funding Open access funding provided by Malmö University.

Declarations

Statements and Declarations No conflict of interest or funding applies to this paper.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Arendt, H. (2003) *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, H. 2005. 'Introduction into politics' in: *The promise of politics*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. pp. 93–200. New York: NY. Schocken Books.
- Emmeche, C. (2015). The borderology of friendship in academia. *AMITY: The Journal of Friendship Studies*, 3(1), 40–59.
- Felski, R. 2020. *Hooked. Art and attachment*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hangartner, J. 2019. Control of teachers under conditions of low-stakes accountability. *On Education Journal for Research and Debate*, 2(5). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2019.5.4.
- Hansen, M. A. 1986. *The Liar*. Translated by Egglisshaw J. J. London: Quartet Books. (Originally published 1950).
- Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions
- Harvey, I. 2012. *Labyrinths of Exemplarity. At the margins of deconstruction*. Albany, US: SUNY Press.
- Illich, I. 1970. *Deschooling society*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Jerrim, J., and S. Sims. 2022. School accountability and teacher stress: international evidence from the OECD TALIS study. *Educ Asse Eval Acc* 34: 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-021-09360-0>.
- Kohlberg, L., and R. Mayer. 1972. Development as the aim of education. *Harvard Educational Review* 42 (4): 449–496. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.42.4.kj6q8743r3j00j60>.
- Lewis, C. S. 1960. *Four loves*. London: Geoffrey Bles.
- Lewis, T. E. 2013. *On study. Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Lewis, T. E. 2020. "Education for potentiality (against instrumentality)". *Policy Futures in Education* 18:7 pp. 878–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1478210320922742>
- Luhmann, N., and K. E. Schorr, eds. 1986. *Zwischen Intranspanz und Verstehen. Fragen an die Prädagogik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Masschelein, J. (2019). Turning a city into a milieu of study: university pedagogy as "frontline". *Educational Theory*, 69(2), 185–203.
- Nixon, J. 2015. *Hannah Arendt and the politics of friendship*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Oakeshott, M. 1962. 'Voice of Poetry in the conversation of mankind'. In: idem, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Oelkers, J. 1994. 'Influence and development: two basic paradigms of education' *studies. in Philosophy and Education* 13: 91–109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01075817>.
- Popper, K.R. (1994). *The Myth of the Framework. In Defence of Science and Rationality*. Edited by M.A. Notturmo. New York: Routledge.
- Pugh, S., ed. 2020. *Conversations. Classical and Renaissance intertextuality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Rytzler, J., and G. Magnússon. 2019. 'Approaching higher education with Didaktik : University Teaching for Intellectual Emancipation'. *European Journal of Higher Education* 9 (2): 190–202. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2018.1515030>.
- Sloterdijk, P. 2009. Rules for the human zoo: a response to the letter on Humanism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27 (1): 12–28. <https://doi.org/10.1068/dst3>.
- Tubbs, N. 2006. *Philosophy of the teacher*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wagenschein, M. 1956. 'Zum Begriff des exemplarischen Lehrens' Internet resource (accessed 08.09.2016): <http://www.martin-wagenschein.de/en/2/W-128.pdf>.
- Wagenschein, M. 1977. 'Rettet die Phänomene!' Internet resource (accessed 02.11.2022) <http://www.martin-wagenschein.de/2/W-204.pdf>.
- Wagenschein, M. 2010. 'Teaching to Understand: on the Concept of the Exemplary in Teaching'. In *Teaching as a reflective practice: the german Didaktik tradition*, eds. I. Westbury, S. Hopmann, and K. Riquarts, 161–177. New York, NY: Routledge.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.