

Educating for dignity; The need for a moral disturbance!

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There is a difference between being educated and being educated, between liberal education and education for liberty; a difference between having a degree and being a person with insight, capable of using knowledge to create a better world. A world with equality, dignity and freedom, as well as a place for critical reflection where political, religious and moral discussions are encouraged.

And that is probably one of the most important tasks for a university today: How to make room for - and accept the right to - extreme opinions, how to meet not only friends and sameness and already-converted fellows, but also those we don't know - the hidden and "misplaced" ones..

We have through history seen too many examples of educated citizens who misuse their knowledge, act against democracy and in the extreme end up as perpetrators, oppressors and terrorists –, they show us that education in itself is not a guarantee against violence, humiliation and abuse. Knowledge is not enough, empathy, political sense and the ability to tackle an objective discussion are also needed. In a dialogue there always are two or more participants who need to listen, argue and justify the validity of their ideas and theories – and they need to engage in the other's positions.

There is always a counterargument, always another point of view and always another human being with rights, convictions and dreams. Verifying empirical statements differ from justifying normative selections and interpret a text and have value discussions.

Education is a never-ending process of making knowledge meaningful – a process of maturation that takes place in each individual and blossoms in dialogue.

In Plato's ideal school, education is not a passive acquisition of facts and skills. It is something acquired through a unique matter of self-knowledge. Even if the platonic ideal of

education lifts the rational, free man up as an ideal citizen, and may today be regarded gender-blind as well as aristocracy-friendly, his concepts of general education may be fruitful in our current context in the way that it is about being deeply convinced of a claim, a reason or an argument, as opposed to being persuaded.

This implies a fundamental shift in the way of looking at the teacher-student relationship – it is an “inquiry-centred” approach to academic knowledge where the common aim for both teacher and student is to succeed with a serious inquiry, it is an existential education inspired by the zetetic, that is, the searching sceptics. The teacher and the students are “in it together”, trying to go deeper into an unsolved problem, analysing a concept, looking at it from shifting perspectives - together. It is an essential democratic element in the dialogue that shifting perspectives are encouraged and lifted up as an ideal, in a friendly atmosphere.

This inquiring method is open and invites a range of creative and impulsive hypotheses. Ideally, the structure of the dialogue has no room for ready-made solutions or predefined answers; ultimately it rests on the possibility that individuals can draw conclusions that may well be changed in the next round of discussion.

Anyone think this is a bit too ideal or get flashbacks from pedagogical views of the 70-ies? That it's easy to say and a nice thought but seriously - it's too far out to work in a classroom of today?

In practice, this attitude towards knowledge does not rock the bottom of the privileged teacher and her authority. To lead this type of academic dialogue presupposes authority and knowledge on both the subject and the method of inquiry where the teacher/conversation leader encourages new quests (Bostad 2006, chapter six) disturbing the students, asking provocative questions and making them think in new terms. But in addition to the platonic ideal of a search for truth, a modern university needs to continuously be aware of, and reflect upon, the environment that determines any learning situation, that the students are persons with a body, a gender, a personal history, a religion or a personal conviction, at a specific place and time.

In other words; the praxis of philosophical inquiry is a “happening”, as Hannah Arendt puts it, something unpredictable, uncontrolled and unexpected, which challenges every theory and method of pedagogy. To ask and make inquiries in a dialogue is to place the question itself out into the open, in contrast to repeating what is a common truth, to ask open questions

makes the topic itself and its different possibilities “floating” as Gadamer puts it, and reveals the distinction between understanding and reflecting or thinking which also implies the process or understanding that something will never be understood.

Let us leave the ideal, but at the same time very practical approach to knowledge and inquire into the pedagogy as a product of everyday life, or more precisely a pedagogy that springs from personal experience, which is then subjected to analysis and critique, thereby becoming more general and of greater universal application.

The philosopher Eva Kittay is a good example of how a precisely personal experience becomes philosophical and then political, or is applied in a critical perspective on power. In her article “The Personal is Philosophical is Political: A Philosopher and Mother of a Cognitively Disabled Person Sends Notes from the Battlefield” (2010) she writes that she found her own practice as a philosopher inadequate and deficient in the encounter with her own daughter, i.e. her daughter’s birth, childhood and adolescence challenged her philosophical understanding in a new and provocative manner. Kittay states that philosophy embraces an untruth, primarily in its application of a general understanding of human qualities. Kittay attempts to demonstrate how investigation of the cognitively-disabled person is absent in much of philosophical ethics.

And I have seen a fruitful relation between the so-called disability-research and the need of a new pedagogy: It opens our eyes for what Hegel called the first intuitive step of epistemology; when knowledge are confronted with something unfamiliar, it tries to escape, and stay put, that is, save its own authority.

According to Kristeva (2010), a (differently-abled) child who has no language is thus able to communicate with others who possess the ability to use language. This same child is likewise able to speak to his or her aspirations, longings and dreams, which are unconsciously present to varying degrees, and waken the silent voices in his or her own consciousness. Kristeva’s vision of utopia is that vulnerability, which primarily arises when one faces people with various disabilities – affecting one subconsciously – is shared by all human beings.

What then are the general structures that form and construct education today, and do we need to foster a general education responsible for more than just the development of specialized

knowledge? Is it possible to agree on a basic set of ethical and moral standards that will pave the way for a more tolerant, empathetic, and cohesive society in the future, or are these values first and foremost something that is expressed and come alive through experience? Peace is a word, as we have heard today!

As I see it, a values-based education is a starting point for dialogue, intellectual freedom, and respect for diversity. Society's dual requirement that schools and universities teach students both academic knowledge and values – guiding the individual's development while pursuing society's demand for competency – often subjects teaching institutions to a myriad of complex demands and pressures. There are competing viewpoints and opinions that must be considered.

My conviction is that knowledge is always connected to values, otherwise it would be pure facts. We need to enlighten the normative foundation of education – to demonstrate how knowledge is concerned with normativity, relating to norms, rules and standards.

The ethical norms that are found in a society reflect in many ways important characteristics of that society's perceptions of reality and its values. It would be impossible for us to understand a ban on taking the life of another if we did not have any notions of what the essence of a human being is. We may say that ethics presupposes a theory of reality.

Furthermore, we can say that ethical norms protect values, because ethical norms have no value in themselves, but they express or protect values in addition to other functions. The norm that we should not harm others concerns values relating to life and health.

However, daily life, and especially daily life at school, in the classrooms, study rooms and playgrounds, is full of unforeseen situations that "out of the blue" reveal conflicts between norms. The ability to exercise ethical reflection and ethical action ought to be promoted in each person – and everyone has the ability to care for others, as well as experiencing dignity. Ethical reflection has value in itself for a pupil's growth first and foremost through the ability to see things from the positions and life situations of others. Ideally, ethical reflection ought to lead to ethical action, at the same time, it is the case that setting good examples by acting ethically, taking responsibility and daring to face the unknown is also the task of a school society.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establish that pupils have a right to co-responsibility and to provide input to the education. It is important as preparation for democratic participation in society and as a basis for societal engagement at the national and international levels. At the same time, this involves schools and educational establishments having to arrange for their pupils to gain experience with different forms of participation and co-operation in democratic processes both in their daily work and by participation in representative bodies.

Knowledge and education have been - and most certainly will be in the future - closely connected to power and social inequalities. Throughout history, access to education has been reserved either for the elite, for men, or the privileged. Also today, we see that the current policies and ideology for education in a society, is a mirror for the government and elected representatives in the Parliament.

Social reproduction is an ongoing challenge in all education, primarily seen as the relationship between good grades and mastering of the curriculum on the one hand and privileged background on the other. This implies that the children from less privileged backgrounds are not able to develop their potential. Or in other words: there is nothing wrong in following up the “best” pupils or the best students with high demands, as long as there is equal opportunities for all to get there.

A good university must acknowledge and take responsibility for its ability to influence both development and the spread of knowledge at a global level. And the only way to succeed is to understand the potential of Universities as a nexus for global solidarity. A university which is firmly rooted in academic freedom is an independent body able to criticize, propose radical idea, and challenge dominant paradigms. This is the reason that political and social movements often start, or find a nurturing environment, at universities. Although it might seem so obvious that it does not need to be stated, a university is a place where ideas are exchanged across the sometimes rigid boundaries of academic disciplines. It is a place of synthesis and discovery, and a place that out of necessity encourages openness to free thinking – because at any given time, a great discovery may be sitting right under our nose!

To reimagine democratic society we must also search for the correspondence between freedom and education, or freedom in education: What parts of the learning methods and

curriculum ought to be elective and decided by the school, the single teacher or the student – and how much should be compulsory and a part of a common culture and a historical-social canon? How should the rights of every child to be guided into their cultural heritage be balanced against the right and freedom of the parents to raise their children according to their own religion and faith? And how should the protection of an individual's right to intellectual and spiritual freedom be balanced against the recognition that the values may be expressed and reasoned for differently in different religions and belief systems? The answers to these questions are dependent upon the ability of schools and universities to stimulate and create autonomous individuals – who think independently, pose critical questions, make ethical choices and participate in the social debates (Bostad 2010).

The Norwegian scientist Nils Christie wrote a book called "Prison Guards in Concentration Camps" - a book about Norwegian prison guards in concentration camps in Northern Norway during the second world war. This book was ranked as one of the 25 most basic works in Norwegian social science ever. Christie shows the effect of seeing others as human beings – and more importantly why humans are capable of violence and torture. Prison guards who had the smallest minimum of personal contact with the prisoners did not participate in the torture; reading letters the prisoners wrote, even seeing that the prisoners got letters or knowing they had a family back home, made the guards aware of the human nature and dignity of the prisoners and put restrictions on their primitive view of the prisoners as animals.

Christie provides important insights into what constitutes a society. Such knowledge on human behaviour is also important for scholars on democratisation. Mainly because it looks at core values also central in human rights and the modern welfare state; such as the intimate relationship between a social right and a social duty, Humiliation and human Dignity.

To engage in the other person is crucial and this takes courage, to disagree with someone is often challenging due to the framework or the settings. We must teach and encourage students as well as each other to seek this courage – and stand up for dignity.

Thank you

