

Education as a way of life

Basic elements of a new education

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes new social challenges resulting from an increased orientation toward an individualising and autonomous way of life. Initially, it outlines the traditional decision and action models governing schooling, career and private life. The second step formulates the criterion of a radical individualisation and applies it to the concept of education. Next, the profile of an understanding of education appropriate for our time is presented as the triad of *interest, individuality and development*. Finally, the practical relevance of this concept is demonstrated by examples.

Key words: - Autonomy, education, individualisation, risk society, society of knowledge, life-long learning

Over recent decades, “individualisation” has presented us with unaccustomed challenges with regard to originality and independence¹, thus placing new demands on education. Conventional values are receding. The significance of hard and fast traditions is fading. Increasingly, the individual has to find their orientation within themselves. A new kind of “autonomy” creates a sense of uncertainty, disorientation, even self-alienation. How to meet this challenge? - First of all, we need to understand the dual nature of this “autonomy” and recognise the *task* (freedom to do what?) inherent in the *freedom* (freedom from what?) it affords. Being *allowed* to make decisions also *obliges* us to do so. There is no one else to do it for us. Failure to consciously shape this newly gained freedom risks it being squandered and will lead to mental overload. Initially, this freedom emerges as a by-product of social development, while the resulting tasks demand that we tackle them individually. In order to meet the challenge of this freedom, as well as being “allowed” we must also be “willing” and “able”. Ulrich Beck sums it up as follows: “We need an everyday, positive model of action with the self at its heart” (Beck, 1986, p. 217). What shape could such a “model of action” take?

Transformation

Against this backdrop, “education” becomes one of the most pressing social issues today (Dietz, 2011). Many of the problems we face today are rooted in failures that can only be rectified by taking a proactive approach to education. This is especially true where children and young people are concerned, even though efforts to this effect can be tinged with ulterior motives. Thus it remains unclear whether vigorous supporters of “all-day schools” are primarily concerned with the needs of children from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds or rather with the self-realisation of parents, aided by their children being tucked away safely all day; or even

1. For more details see Karl-Martin Dietz, *Jeder Mensch ein Unternehmer. Grundzüge einer dialogischen Kultur*. Karlsruhe, 2008

with the utilisation of highly qualified mothers in a labour market affected by skill shortages. The rationales given often lack precision. There is no doubt, however, that they are clearly distinguishable.

Rethinking is also needed with regard to what was called “national education” in the 19th century and “adult education” since the Weimar Republic. This branch of education has since undergone a “realistic transformation”, gradually changing from a common-knowledge based approach to one favouring hands-on skills. “Continuing education and training” emerged. This as well as the concept of “life-long learning”, conceived in the 1960s (and accelerated since approximately 1990), put the emphasis on basic skills and attitudes. Collective knowledge is replaced by self-organised learning activity that promotes the development of universal human skills. “Learning” is not something tied to specific organisations. Rather, it becomes something “informal” that takes place in all parts of human life. “Life-long or life-wide learning [...] or training [...] is an educational policy concept comprising all age groups, educational institutions and forms of learning. It has only just started to become the subject of scientific debate. In Germany, it finds acceptance chiefly in the further education sector, while representatives of school education and university teaching methods embrace it somewhat more cautiously [...]” (Nolda, 2008, p. 14).

Today, however, making universally applicable points of view relevant for individuals has become increasingly questionable. It is up to the individual to set their own goals in learning. Education as an anticipation of the future must be able to “meet the challenge of the unexpected in the individual’s future working life” (Nolda, *ibid.*, p.32). In an effort to tackle the growth crisis in 1978, the Club of Rome developed a concept for innovative learning, shifting the emphasis to participation, autonomy, integration and anticipation. The “risk society” as described by Beck (1986) is characterised first and foremost by man constantly putting himself in danger through his own actions and the unintended negative effects of progress in science and technology. Everyone has become their own ‘sorcerer’s apprentice’: ‘spirits that I’ve cited my commands ignore’ (Goethe, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, transl. Edwin Zeydel). There is now an abundance of examples. To recognise these as the “downside” of individualisation may open our eyes, yet it is not the solution to the problem. This requires another step, away from the risk society toward a society of knowledge (*ibid.*, p. 47). “Post-industrial society is a society of knowledge in two respects: firstly, because change is increasingly driven by research and development..., and secondly, because society ... attaches more and more importance to the realm of knowledge” (Bell, 1996, p. 219).

The need for this “knowledge” to acquire a new dimension has already been argued by Peters and Waterman (1982): Experimental approach, playful mindset, creativity and being guided by a given situation rather than long-term planning, as well as being ready for self-transformation are the qualifications that will be expected from employees in the future. Such qualities, attitudes and skills are much closer to the individual’s needs than values of old such as industriousness, timeliness, adaptability, etc. which, in some quarters, are still adhered to. This emerging “transformation” of educational objectives signifies a qualitative step forward with regard to both mental activity and skills training. This ‘step’, or rather some “stepping stones”, are the subject of this article.

In business, and commonly also in everyday life, we act if we can answer two questions in the positive: - 1. What is the likely result? (focused on result) and: 2. How do we achieve the desired result? (focused on method). - If both are predefined we forestall something genuinely new from taking place; we prevent experiences from being gathered “along the way” which were not envisaged from the outset; we stop unexpected realms of “reality” from emerging which previously had been shut out; or we keep tradition and prescription from being replaced by originality.

Individual orientation

If the challenges and achievements of individualisation are to make an impact on the future of learning, education needs to face up to a more mature and responsible audience. “Today, ‘maturity’ means the individual’s ability to grasp the essence of things beyond their surface and to embrace, entirely objectively, the practical consequences of this show.” What matters most is “not primarily a vast body of knowledge

but rather the ability to grasp the structures and potential of things and seize on them imaginatively in our actions” (Brater, 1998, p. 155). How then do we gain adequate abilities to tackle tomorrow’s challenges, the particulars of which we have no way of knowing yet? How do we learn to actively shape rather than just react? - It is not a question of replacing old values with new ones. Rather, the task is to substitute *normative* values with *individual* orientation. “Autonomy” demands a new type of education, a new impetus in the culture of learning: all-round, spontaneous, self-supporting (initiative), individual (no one-size-fits-all curriculum) and distinct. More precisely, the nature of the challenge presented by this “autonomy” is threefold. First and foremost, with regard to the setting free from traditional ways and values. We try to understand the workings behind these in order to gain some control over them. What is it that leads to the total loss of these obligatory values? What aspects are primarily affected? Where are persistent forces at work? How exactly do we handle all this? To start with, we need to understand the circumstances as they are. - A challenge of a different kind emerges from how we handle ourselves in a situation of inner change, e.g. self-awareness, self-criticism, self-development. We always hit a brick wall. Where can we find the orientation and strength we need to shape our life? - Ultimately, the open future poses the questions: - Where do we want to go? What perspectives and goals in life do we choose? How can we evolve to act from within ourselves but as part of the whole?

On closer inspection, the challenge we pose to ourselves on the horizon of “autonomy” is a three-step process:-

1. Epistemological interest: Understanding what goes on. Not passively riding on the coat-tails of events, reacting and evaluating occurrences emotionally but: Facing the events and trying to understand what goes on (phenomena), how it happened (causes), what is changing, what is lost and what is gained (knowledge of development). In practical terms, this means generating questions to stimulate debate where formerly there were merely assumptions and positions, thus opening up new horizons.
2. Individuality: Autonomy as a way to access oneself, questioning that which has become. This may mean, e.g.,
 - to let go of old and perhaps much-loved circumstances, insights, points of view and emotions;
 - to reflect on one’s own limits. This is an existential and not merely an intellectual process. My entire existence is put to the test; my sense of life may be plunged into a crisis;
 - acting without accustomed reassurance and orientation, searching for one’s own intentions;
 - withstanding and consciously shaping crises: experimental way of life.
3. Development: actively embracing the new. Concentrating our attention on what emerges when we step back from the single-minded “mover and shaker” in us. Discovering and reinforcing new pathways, new goals and new origins. In other words, creating originality in the sense of an ethical individualism.

The three-step process of interest, individuality and development as outlined here describes the actual secret of “education” today. “Autonomy” thus becomes code for an extensive reorientation of the human being and their way of life, far removed from any subjective arbitrariness, and without withdrawing from reality. As a result, education does not merely promote qualifications and purposive-rational action (“competence”). It also ventures into a goal-setting, productive realm where the sources of individual action are to be found. Learning can no longer be something that is predominantly problem-oriented. Rather, it has to lead to an open future. “The significance of demand-oriented qualifications will gradually decline” (Beck, 1998). A reactive outlook on life is replaced by a creative one (Senge, 1990, p. 173).

The forgotten link between ‘self’ and ‘world’ comes to the fore once again, preventing a mutual annulment of the two. This is brought about by commonly regarding the ‘self’ as a function of social factors, and the ‘world’ as a subjective construct (cf.: Hübner, 2010, p. 487). As a result, very little remains of either. Yet, developers of mainstream scientific theories defend these assumptions tooth and nail, while the opposing views are rarely considered discussible. At best, they meet with irony. This is a fairly reliable indicator of a subtle form of collective repression on behalf of a way of thinking which may not yet be showing its true colours. The fact that each of the above assumptions is self-contradictory - once considered a mortal sin against science! - seems to give little cause for concern.

Old and new education

Based on these deliberations, the basic elements of a “new education” may be obtained. While, in recent decades, the understanding of education was based on the conditionability of the human being and therefore had to predetermine or presuppose the “meaning” of things unreflecting, new education makes us move independently on the level of meaning, using it as a starting point for everything else. Originality replaces traditional behaviour. Future education will be about more than factual knowledge. It will also include autonomous orientational knowledge, enabling us to control our skills and competences ourselves. Traditionally, learning meant to adapt particular ideas or methods. In future, there will be a stronger emphasis on a developmental knowledge and the ability to shape the processes of knowledge acquisition autonomously. Informal learning will gradually replace learning that can be organised in institutions. Formerly, knowledge required predefined parameters, commissioning and instruction. New knowledge enables us to act on our own terms (initiative) and creates its own framework. Administrative acting becomes formative acting. Acting intentionally and experimentally will become more important than acting analytically. Hitherto, the assumption was that the individual had to be socialised appropriately. Going forward, an individualisation of society will be the main focus. Society exists for individuals, and is increasingly made up of their initiatives. As already stated in the Herrenchiemsee Draft Constitution (1948): “The state exists for the sake of man, not man for the sake of the state” (Böckenförde, 2001, p. 17). In our traditional understanding, the origins of life and our actions are predominantly a product of social conditions. In future, they will be more and more rooted in the productive minds of individuals. Many entrepreneurs and artists already live and act on this level today. How can all of us become entrepreneurs in this respect? (Dietz, 2008) The ideal is an autonomous individual who falls victim neither to conformation nor arbitrariness. Mental training for the optimisation of action competence would fall well short of what is required. By transforming professional education “from purely purposive learning to an education that is „purpose setting““, traditional educational concepts are being questioned (Arnold, 2006, p. 27).

Synopsis:

Old education	New education
The programmable (adapted) human being	The autonomous human between conformation and arbitrariness
Presupposing meaning	Discovering meaning independently
Traditional behaviour Factual knowledge based on prescription	Originality Orientational knowledge from which expert knowledge can be generated autonomously
Additive, prepared ideas points of view	Critical, integrative, developmental knowledge Creative uncertainty
Organised learning	Informal learning
Regulations, commissionings	Acting from within oneself (Initiative)
Administrative acting	Formative acting
Resource-orientation analytical confirming	Intention-orientation evolutionary experimental
Socializing the individual	Individualizing society
Origins of action: Social conditions, experience	Origins of action: The mentally productive individual, originality

The outlined three-step process with its gaps and leaps takes the place of a linear accumulation of knowledge. It is not about new curricula of learning but a new paradigm of education. We must prepare ourselves for “learning” without knowing beforehand what specifically there is to learn, what experiences we may gain, and how exactly we are to proceed. Openness and awareness toward the unknown rate very highly.

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