

The Current Educational System as the Enemy of Experiential Learning

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In this paper, I intend to criticise the educational system in its present form as it endorses a type of learning which is detrimental to the development of the students' critical and experiential capacities. I begin by highlighting the problematic assumptions embedded within the 17th and 18th century idea of liberal education, along with its desire to preserve the students' autonomy and their ability to think critically. I then move on to examine the recent developments in education which contribute to compromising students' critical abilities and to reinforcing their passive acceptance of their individual and social fate. I argue that this is accomplished by the current educational system's promotion of a form of pseudo-experience which can be characterised as 'psychoanalysis in reverse'. This diminishes the students' capacity for genuine experiential learning which can only be achieved through the deconstruction of the repressive mechanisms and unconscious resistances that render them impotent to experience anything as immediate and alive.

Let us begin with an account of the historical changes that led to the creation of the current educational system. With the advent of modernity and the age of enlightenment, the identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity was endangered. The emphasis on the importance of the function of reason was imposed on a traditional culture which had a critical potential embedded in its close relation to nature as well as in its scepticism, wit and irony. In this culture, the elderly were the main 'educational' resource because they embodied a continuity of consciousness, an understanding based on a coherent remembrance of the past. A relatively homogeneous existence gave traditional life the basis of judgement, and the wisdom of the elderly was respected for the experience it contained. However, this experience was also based on a narrow and dogmatic worldview as it resisted anything innovative that could transform and upset its directives. Thus, the education of the intellect was simultaneously a liberation from, and a threat to, this way of life, a release from the chains of dogma and superstition and a danger to the continuation of a shared culture of lived experience which had negative implications for judgement itself.

For this reason, enlightenment thought aimed to replace the judgement of experience with reasoned judgement. This task was assigned to the idea of transformative, comprehensive education, or 'Bildung', operative in 17th and

18th century liberal thought. Thus, rational judgement was meant to be achieved through the cultivation or development of individuals into completely self-determining persons, who are integrated, at home within, and in harmony with their society. In this sense, comprehensive education has always been a form of re-education, an attempt to replace the traditional experience of a coherent existence based on a mimetic, close relationship with nature that has been lost, with a higher, rational unity of moral individuals who pursue their own ends and realise their potentials, using their own understanding without irrelevant external influences. On the basis of this, people were meant to be able confidently to work their way out of the unthinking ordering of their 'animal' existence and state of barbarism, and establish a law-governed social order capable of just and fair action.

This demand for reasoned judgement and self-determination is strongly present in the work of Immanuel Kant who in 1784 responded to the question "What is Enlightenment?" by answering "autonomy" or "emancipation from self-imposed immaturity". By autonomy Kant meant intellectual and moral autonomy. On the one hand, he wanted individuals to transcend the influence of the 'wise' elders, priests and aristocrats and to think for themselves. On the other hand, he wanted them to rise above their desires and act in accordance with moral and intellectual norms that they themselves created by exercising their reason. For Kant, moreover, norms formulated in this way would be universally applicable. Thus, from the Kantian perspective, the role of education was to create 'autonomous' individuals who will be able to overcome their racial, gender and social situations as well as their 'natural' inclinations and desires so as to formulate rational and moral judgements.

However, at the very heart of this liberal idea of education there was a notion of culture which separated the rational and moral from the natural and restricted the cultural to the rational. It also produced a division between mental and manual labour. This separation was the product of the liberal ideology's belief that nature needed to be mastered by beginning to treat and perceive it as though it consisted of extrinsic objects to be manipulated and controlled. The idea of a temporary and playful or mimetic identification with the environment was eclipsed by an identification that grasped the object from a calculated distance. What is important to understand here is that this mastery over nature was accomplished through self-sacrifice. In order to set ourselves apart from nature - so as to control it all the more - we had to learn how to renounce what we shared with nature; that is to say, we had to repudiate the sensuous and material aspects of the self. (See Adorno and Horkheimer, 1986).

Our intellectual freedom was purchased, therefore, at an enormous cost: the internal and external domination of nature. However, as Freud (1915) astutely pointed out in his account of the 'return of the repressed', mutilated nature returned in distorted form to haunt us. Sensuous contact with the environment suppressed by civilization, for instance, touch and smell,

became repulsively alien to us. The subject that was the product of this liberal education betrayed its uncompromising inflexibility in its reaction, for example, to animals, women and the human body. The 'badness' that was therefore attributed to this natural 'other', was in actuality a projection of what remained unsatisfactorily repressed - and what threatened to disrupt the self's identity. Borrowing Freud's (1919) idea of the 'uncanny' [das Unheimliche], we can argue that what seemed abominably alien was in fact all too familiar. The unheimlich characteristics that returned to haunt our mind were the very things that were repressed within this mind. What we despised was really what we secretly longed for (that is, the repressed mimetic closeness to nature).

The liberal idea of education, therefore, that turned on a pedagogic separation of aspects of human existence and presented culture as something disengaged from nature, the body and practical aspects of daily life did not always develop or enhance the capacity for judgement. Divorcing itself from the experience of the body and its natural and social determinants, it often suppressed intellectual capacities even though it had its basis in a culture of rational judgement.

However, despite its problematic character, this liberal idea does not contain only the means to damage culture but is also capable of reinstating the capacity for reflection. In this respect, we should neither sanction this liberal ideology nor discard its conception of autonomy, one which has established conditions for objective judgement and, therefore, for a certain limited notion of subjective freedom.

Due to the separation of the intellectual from social conditions, an independent culture has been developed since the advent of the idea of Bildung, establishing the importance of critical objectivity. In a fragment published as the Theory of Bildung, one of the most significant proponents of liberal education, Wilhelm von Humbolt (1793-4/2000), states that Bildung is about linking the student's self to the world in the "most general, most animated and most unrestrained interplay". However, he also argues that it is crucial that the student... should not lose himself in this alienation, but rather should reflect back into his inner being the clarifying light and comforting warmth of everything that he undertakes outside himself. (von Humbolt, 1793-4/2000, p. 58).

It is this emphasis on self-reflexivity that has the potential of providing a glimmer of hope for genuine autonomy. It is not the autonomy of someone living in a direct and sensuous way, and it does not guarantee the radical transformation of the world, but it at least provides a degree of intellectual freedom. This enables students to refuse to blindly adapt to society's laws, as it develops their capacity for self-determining judgement, encourages their desire to establish a critical distance from prevailing social perspectives, and fosters their need to be honest and decent with themselves and others.

If liberal education reflected the idea of providing the kinds of cultural

experiences to students which fostered their desire to think critically, then a recent development in education, which Adorno (1972) termed 'Halbbildung', translated as 'half-education', produces the desire to comply with the current cultural and social directives. Half-education is that which is left when the conditions of autonomy inherent in liberal education are discarded and integration and conformity become the central focus. This type of education provides students with a set of presumptions which filter their actual existence, offering them a way of dealing with their anxiety by smoothing over any contradictions and tensions generated by a thoughtless adaptation to the social whole. It achieves this by convincing students that the existing social structures will never change while providing stimulation for their tedious and powerless existence.

External institutions like the mass media have contributed to the students' sense of powerlessness and uncritical acceptance by becoming the major influence over both the content of general education and its pedagogical practice. Increasingly, thoughtless adaptation occurs as much outside the formal institutions of teaching and learning as within them. As Adorno (1972) remarked, "What happens in the cultural domain is not the... lack of Bildung [but] is Halbbildung. ... [T]he pre-bourgeois conception of the world ... was destroyed.... Nevertheless, the a priori of the essentially bourgeois concept of culture - autonomy - had no time to develop. Consciousness goes immediately from one heteronomy to another. The bible is replaced ... by the television." (p.99)

And it can just as well be said to have replaced the knowledge conveyed by school teachers or university lecturers. The mass media command the students' undivided attention and their readiness to participate to a far greater degree than any teacher's or lecturer's clever or ingenious teaching plan. Thus, teachers and lecturers feel compelled to use multi-media presentations for the good reason that it has become necessary for them to be 'entertaining' so as to be accepted by students who believe that the only knowledge worth having is the one that has 'entertainment value' attached to it. However, by following this trend, they deny the students the kinds of experiences which could develop their critical and self-reflexive capacities.

In this respect, the mass media type of information provided in contemporary education becomes the mortal enemy of the educational process. It encourages a form of superficial knowledge which produces hatred and resentment against everything that is 'too deep' or 'too complex'. This is because the continuity of consciousness in which everything not present survives, in which practice and association establish lasting temporal links in the students' mind, has now been replaced by the selective, disconnected, interchangeable and ephemeral state of being informed (finding what is 'in' and what is 'out') which will rapidly be cancelled by other, more recent, information.

Consequently, the students' memory becomes very weak as they can only remember what is immediately present. It is as if they live a life where the

memory of a previous event is instantly replaced by the actuality of the next one. Absence and lack are not recognised or tolerated as they are constantly negated by an eternal presence. Thus, their actions are motivated neither by a sense of who they were, in the past, nor by what they are missing in the present, nor by what they would like to be in the future, but by a pseudo-immediacy which ultimately signifies a collapse of critical consciousness into the mass consciousness of our consumer society.

Here psychoanalysis should be utilized to examine the active exclusion of critical consciousness and the generation of psychological blocks to memory and self-reflexivity. It could also help us understand how the educational ideal of 'hardness' (i.e., the belief that the student can only achieve a strong moral character if s/he manages to endure the maximum degree of pain and hardship), in which many may believe without reflecting about it, is completely erroneous. This is because this process of instilling discipline and moral strength can become a screen-image for masochism that, as psychoanalysis has established, can easily turn into sadism and produce subjects who are incapable of feeling guilt for the pain they are inflicting on others. As Adorno (1998) states in his essay "Education after Auschwitz": Being hard, the vaunted quality education should inculcate, means absolute indifference toward pain as such. In this the distinction between one's own pain and that of another is not so stringently maintained. Whoever is hard with himself earns the right to be hard with others as well and avenges himself for the pain whose manifestations he was not allowed to show and had to repress. (p.199).

Moreover, psychoanalytic ideas should be used to examine how the educational system's endorsement of 'coldness' (i.e., its promotion of emotional distance and lack of empathy) produces students who are deeply indifferent towards whatever happens to everyone else except themselves. For example, the educational system in its present form places far more emphasis on the students' successful completion of a series of competitive exams than on the development of their ability to empathically relate to others, promoting thus the relentless pursuit of their own individual interests against the interests of everyone else. This has settled into the character of students, to their innermost core, and contributes to the modern subjects' lack of concern for other people's distress and a sense of isolation through the creation of an unquenchable appetite for competition. The only reaction to this process is the so-called 'lonely crowd', "a banding together of people completely cold who cannot endure their own coldness and yet cannot change it". (Adorno, 1998, p.201). It is no accident, therefore, that there is a proliferation of 'reality' TV shows like Big Brother, The Apprentice, The X Factor, etc., that blatantly illustrate how extremely narcissistic and emotionally distant individuals have to pretend to get along with each other and work as a team so as to win the TV competition.

Thus, modern groups are formed through coldness, i.e., through the absence of libidinal investments - in contrast to Freud's (1921) belief that

groups are created through the establishment of intense libidinal bonds between its members. In the reduction of intersubjective relationships to indifferent connections between objects, coldness results in the development of a consciousness that is characterized by “a rage for organization, by the inability to have any immediate human experiences at all, by a certain lack of emotion, by an overvalued realism” (Adorno, 1998, p.198). As such, modern subjectivity is devoid of emotional resonance and incapable of recognising difference or the value of affectionate bonds.

However, as the current educational system plays such a crucial role in the creation of this ‘unemotional’ subject, it can also attempt to invert this process by working against the psychological and social preconditions that produce this character structure. In order to accomplish this, its teaching practices should be altered in such a way as to discourage the naturalization of hardness and coldness as educational virtues. One might think that this can be accomplished by giving more warmth and love to students. However, students who have no idea of the coldness and hardness of social life are then truly traumatized by the cruelty of it when they must leave their protected educational environment. If anything can help against hardness and coldness, then it is the students’ understanding of the conditions that determine them and the attempt to fight those conditions. The first thing therefore is to bring hardness and coldness to the consciousness of themselves, of the reasons why they arose. Thus, the educational system must take seriously an idea which is familiar to psychoanalysis: that anxiety should not be repressed. As Adorno (1998) puts it: When anxiety is not repressed, when one permits oneself to have, in fact, all the anxiety that this reality warrants, then precisely by doing that, much of the destructive effect of unconscious and displaced anxiety will probably disappear. (p.198).

In this case, anxiety is a productive signal that the ‘hard’ and ‘cold’ character structure of the modern student/subject is no longer working properly, and that s/he is close to understanding the unbearable truth which his/her character formation attempts to conceal. As such, anxiety is the most powerful educational affect for exploring the psychological contents petrified by hardness and frozen over by coldness and its social determinants. (See also Lewis, 2006).

However, is it possible to establish a psychoanalytically-inspired learning culture which would allow students to creatively explore their anxieties when recent developments in education regard ‘student satisfaction’ as the only relevant measure of teaching quality? In other words, how could students be encouraged to examine the reasons behind their dissatisfaction with the ‘cold’, instrumental logic of the market when these recent developments suggest that teachers and lecturers should be ‘service providers’ who need to keep their students ‘satisfied’ by fulfilling their ‘consumerist’ demand for accumulation of educational assets so as to increase their marketability and future employability prospects? In a recent article for the London Review of Books, Stefan Collini (2010) succinctly summarises this dilemma: I would

hope the students I teach come away with certain kinds of dissatisfaction (including with themselves: a 'satisfied' student is nigh-on ineducable), and it matters more that they carry on wondering about the source of that dissatisfaction than whether they 'liked' the course or not. This is another respect in which the 'consumer' model is simply misleading, an error encouraged by the prevalence in current edspeak of the category of 'the student experience' (p.24).

These thoughtful remarks seem to indicate that it is absolutely crucial for us to resist the application of this 'consumer' model of education which promotes this superficial category of 'student experience'. They also imply that a genuine 'student experience' should not be based on the renunciation of the students' 'dissatisfaction' with the current educational and social systems and the anxiety they produce. In this respect, a psychoanalytic understanding of anxiety can provide the guidelines for a new education not based on renunciation and repression but on insight, an education to be worked out in the future.

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