Whatever happened to teaching?

Carl Anders Säfström, Niclas Månsson & Ali Osman

Introduction

Our interest in this article is to explore some ideas on «teaching» and «learning» and to argue for the importance of shifting education’s focus and interest back to «teaching». This is not entirely new; others have contributed before us, such as Gert Biesta (2006, 2005) with his considerations in «Beyond learning», and Tomas Englund (2011) in «Linguistic turn within curriculum theory». Other contributions include Lars Lovlie’s keynote at NERA Congress in 2006 with his «Pedagogy of place», as well as interesting takes on «Education as a religion in the learning society» by Arto Jauhiainen & Marika Alho-Malmelin (2004). Even though we will in some instances use «the Swedish example», we will argue that the processes and tendencies we deal with in this article are in no way exclusively «Swedish». Rather Sweden is an interesting case since, in comparison with other European countries, the shift towards «learning» seems to be rather extreme in its consequences, as we explore below. In that sense we treat the «Swedish situation» as a case for making problematic the exclusion of the concept «teaching» as an important, if not the most important, concept in order for the emancipatory potentials of education to take concrete form.

To frame this article, then, we particularly highlight Biesta’s and Englund’s work. While Biesta’s research is theoretically oriented and contextualised mainly concerning the UK, Eng-
lund’s work is often set in a Swedish socio-political context. Biesta is arguing for and shows the need to move educational theory beyond learning, while Englund’s focus and contribution in this discussion is his insistence on the need to develop a normative perspective on teaching, in line with the societal goals of democratic citizenship toward which education plays such a significant role.

**«Teaching» as a counter discourse**

The primary aim of this article is to explore some of the underlying factors leading to a toning down, and in some instances total exclusion, of «teaching» in the broader educational discourse. It is important to stress that our intention is to point to some trends and circumstances in this regard, but we are in no way claiming that we have the final truth on the matter. Rather, what we want to do is to ask rather openly – what on earth happened to teaching? What we hope to achieve with this article is to stress the importance of the question itself rather than delivering an answer. That is, we think that educational discourse is at the end of «learning», and that we need to re-invent teaching as a liberating force of education. This re-invention is not so much about presenting a particular form of teaching (even though we shortly discuss what we call emancipatory teaching), as asking ourselves what education, as a body of thought and action, can be about if it does not include teaching as a fundamental concept. We suggest that the importance of «teaching» is, as a concept and practice, it opens up for emancipation and change, while «learning», as it currently appears in educational discourse, hinders both.

That means that we both adhere to Biesta’s critique of «learnification» of educational discourse as well as explore an alternative view of education which is in line with Englund’s normative perspective. What Englund persistently brings to the fore, and which we fully agree with, is the need to foreground the purpose and content of «teaching» as a matter of public democratic concern, as something that is not «given» or «neutral» but that shifts in time and place and in relation to different social and political formations (see also Ljunggren, 1996). In the following, we explore some characteristics of the time and place in which we practice education, focusing on the social and political formation of the «learnification» of education at the expense of ‘teaching’.

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entire field of educational research, at the same time as learning seems to have lost its credibility as an exclusively educational concept. Rather, and as we will show in the following, «learning» seems to be, if not downright reducible to, at least to have strong links to the individualisation and marketisation of education in neo-liberal society.

The politics of learning

In line with Biesta’s and Englund’s points of view, we say that if the sole focus on «learnings» forms the content and purpose of education by, for example, perceiving learning foremost as an individual, psychological process, the social role of education tends to disappear from the agenda, together with its emancipatory potential (Englund, 2011; Biesta, 2006, 2013, see also Bandura, 1986). For instance, the dominance of educational psychology has led to the shift from teaching to how individuals learn, and in this process the individual dimension of sociocultural learning is overly emphasised at the expense of teaching the social content and purpose of education (Biesta, 2006).

The discourse of learning appears to have become an aim in itself and has transformed the debate on education to focus on self-actualisation, self-authorisation and self-emancipation (Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003). Since the concept of learning, transformed to discourse, has ruled out teaching as a foundational concept for education in favour of its own self-centered logic, it has become almost impossible to criticise learning (Biesta, 2005; Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003). Learning, through the lenses of neo-liberal glasses is not just a hot topic, it is affecting the whole educational system (Beach, 2012). Moreover, learning is not just a topic in the strictly academic or educational realm. In the discourse about learning, the use of concepts such as learning societies, life-long learning, learning organisations, and learning cities, to mention a few, shows that everything is (or can be) about learning (c.f. Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003).

The uncritical acceptance of learning, together with its individualistic and individualising logic, shows, according to Contu, Grey and Örtenblad (2003), how far the discourse of learning affected not only the educational realm, but also the political and social realm. As we will argue in course of this article, it seems that the promise of learning not only ruled out teaching, but also the public part of education (c.f. Lynch, 2006).

As implied earlier, the objective of this article is to challenge «the politics of learning» by showing what meaning it attributes to the role and function of education in society and how it goes about doing so. We argue that there is a need to shift the discourse and interest in public education from education as learning for making a living for oneself to education as making a life together with others (Berggren, 2012; Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003; Englund & Quennerstedt, 2008; Sund & Lundberg, 2012). The former carries serious consequences not only for democracy and change, but such an educational system also neglects skills that are essential to keeping the emancipatory potential of education alive (Säfström, 2011). Learning, in the context of new liberalism, is relentlessly individualistic and individualising (Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003).

According to this individualistic logic, the educational system is being asked to produce commercially-oriented individuals rather than to educate public-oriented persons (c.f. Lynch, 2006). «Learning» is for ‘now’, fit for a particular economical order of society. Education is not about social togetherness but is limited to oneself in order to compete against everyone else. The most apparent trend for education is to accept the rules of the market economy and play the game ac-
cordingly (c.f. Bauman, 2001). This change leads to what might be called a marketisation of education (comparable to Georg Ritzer’s (1993) thesis on _The McDonaldization of Society_), since it is more or less neglecting skills that are essential to keeping democratic and public life alive.

**Signs of «learning»**

In Sweden, the term «learning» became the «new» name for education in the beginning of the 2000s. It appeared in a diversity of contexts, such as research programs and groups, courses, programs, technologies, strategies, desires as well as rooted in political programs, school policies and popular discourses on education. For instance, «learning» could simultaneously be about a course in teacher education, the political economical formation of the work force as in «life long learning» and the theme for the European conference on educational research (ECER) in Gothenburg 2008, entitled «From Teaching to Learning». The latter in addition seemed to signify a shift to privilege learning at the total expense of teaching. Since it was accepted as the theme for ECER it showed that the trend of «learning discourses» at the expense of conceptions of «teaching» was largely a European phenomenon (Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003; Biesta, 2005).

Interestingly enough, it was also during the early 2000s that various forms of _didaktik_ (didactics) gained popularity and _utbildningsvetenskap_ (educational sciences) was launched on a wide scale. We find this puzzling since historically _didaktik_, at least since Comenius’ _Didactica Magna_ was conceived, may be defined as «the art of teaching»; however, it is now presented as «learning» in spite of teaching or instead of teaching. We find it particularly puzzling since the strong revival of _didaktik_ in some of the Nordic countries was not formed as a counter discourse at all, fur-
such an idea within educational theory. In the shift from «teaching to learning», learning becomes an empty concept; at the same time the shift turns learning into an all-inclusive discourse that deprives education from not only critical thinking but also neutralizes what is political in education. Political problems within education tend to turn into learning problems, which in turn is feeding the demand for «more learning» without «content, direction and purpose» other than those that are already formed within a neo-liberal worldview (Biesta, 2013; Simmons & Masschelein, 2013; Ols
don et al., 2013).

As an empty concept, learning can be applied to whatever content there is to be learned, and the term seems to carry with it a certain limitlessness. Everything can be learnt and learning is just a question of choice, perception, training, attention and foci. A «theory of learning» that is interested in the goals and content of education without taking into account the conditions of learning is not scientific but ideological. Ironically, though, learning as an idea of fulfillment seems also to put a limit on education when it is connected to a particular content, as if education is completed when certain content is transferred to someone, or if we just pay attention, we will learn. Learning – as a question of choice, perception, training, attention and foci – is also limiting in the sense it adds a certain emptiness to educational practices that tends to deprive education of its emancipatory potential.

Below, we will be questioning «learning» as an exclusively interesting concept for educational theory. It is important to stress, however, that we are not arguing that learning needs to be expelled from educational theory altogether. What we are saying is that when «learning» becomes the sole focus for educational theory, it tends to place «teachings» out of sight, and when that happens educational theory loses its critical stance. We also think that when «teaching» is made redundant as a valuable concept for educational theory, we are not only losing an evident link to what teachers do, but also to the emancipatory potential of education (Säfström, 2011, 2014). What we argue is, in other words, that «teaching» is closely linked to ideas about emancipation and change while «learning» (particularly without an understanding of its relation to teaching) tends to exclude such possibility (c.f. Dewey, 1902).

**Learning the lesson or freeing the life-process**

The conditions for learning in educational settings was traditionally characterized by: «I know X because I have learned X», or «I know X because my teacher taught me what X actually is». Learning in this sense is a matter of transferring some facts from a transmitter (the teacher) to a receiver (the pupil). This perspective constructs the receiver as a *tabula rasa*, and has largely been discredited within the educational research field (Olson & Torrance, 1998). Learning through reception has been criticised for its understanding of learning as a one-way process, for its ignorance of what actually is being learned, and for its portrayal of the learner as a passive subject submitted to the authority of a transmitter (Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1998; Sfard, 1998). According to the critics, learning is more than a question of reception and the learner is more than a passive subject since «learners are persons, living in families and communities, who are struggling to reconcile their desires, beliefs, and goals with the world around them» (Olson & Bruner, 1998:14). These critics shifted the attention away from the activities of the teacher to the activities of the learner, and is the consequence of a constructivist
and socio-cultural theory of learning (see for example Olson & Torrance, 1998; Säljö, 2000, 2005). From a socio-cultural perspective, learning has to be understood as a contextual enterprise with more than two parties involved, and it has to be looked upon as situated and understood through the conditions that are specific for the given learning situation.

However, we claim that even if we leave the notion of the learner as a passive subject behind, and understand learning as a social and contextual event in which people are actively involved in a specific educational setting, the question still remains: Whatever happened to teaching? In a formal educational setting, teaching is always formed by some intentions, and even if the individuals involved (a child, a pupil or an adult) learns something as active learners, through participation, the given educational setting still needs a teacher to follow up to see if the particular intentions in mind have been achieved or not (c.f. Dewey, 1902). This is not to say that learning does not occur without intention or that so-called «informal learning» does not take place, but rather that what a teacher can control is her or his teaching.

According to what was mentioned above, we can detect at least two ways in which «learning» is made meaningful in relation to teaching within educational theory. Learning is either seen as an acquisition in which teaching is reduced to delivering a package of «truths» to be consumed by the learner, or it is seen through participation, in which teaching is the form through which participation in communities of learning is made possible and in which the life-process gets its direction, meaning and fulfillment.

If we follow Dewey’s (1902) conviction that education is about the stimulation of the child’s powers by the demands of a social situation, education is not only a question of learning through acquisition or learning through participation, it is also a question of power, and the teacher carries, at least according to Dewey (1902), a great responsibility in this matter. It is the teacher’s task to make visible, explain, and concretise concepts, subjects, themes, principles, norms, values and so forth, and students are supposed to learn, criticise, accept or be skeptical to them. Hence teaching is not, nor does it have to be, a question of external imposition; it is rather, if we follow Dewey, about «freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment» (Dewey, 1902:17 italics in original).

No learning without teaching

Dewey’s statement on the potential of education to «free the life-process …» is particularly interesting for our argument, since for a critical pragmatic curriculum theory there can be no learning without teaching. In order to make teaching an educational concept it needs to be understood within a particular context – a context in which «freeing the life-process» is the very aim of education. According to Dewey (1966), «learnings» is nothing other than a fundamental approach to changing life itself, whereas teaching is that which one has some control over. Teaching can be rationally planned with the aim of freeing the life-force in individuals. Learning, on the other hand, is that which we cannot control since if we intend to do so we are hindering the life-force in reaching its most adequate fulfilment (see also Biesta, 2006). In other words, if one could control learning in a total sense it would not only bring us outside what we normally would call education, and set us to embark on words such as programming, subordination, and total control of the individual, but it would also put a halt to the life-force itself.
Teaching, however, while being that which we indeed can «control» opens up, and gives direction to, how we can «free the life-process for its own most adequate fulfillment», that is how we can direct education into «making of life». Yet it is not an unlimited «making of life». What is limiting the control exercised by teaching in an educational relation is that teaching is always teaching of something particular, it needs to be based in something, which always is larger than the process of teaching itself (Dewey, 1902 page number). That is, teaching is not that which controls knowledge, but is that which translates knowledge, making it contingent and situated in the lives of students living together with others.

If teaching makes knowledge contingent and situated in the living experiences of students, it is not primarily about «learning for making a living» but about making a life together with others. Consequently, teaching is also a form of activity in which emancipation is a potential (Bingham & Biesta 2010; Säfström, 2012). What tends to be at stake if «teaching» is blocked out from an understanding of educational relations is the very potentiality of emancipation, or what we call in this article «education for making a life».

**Contextualisation and two distinct yet intertwined aims of education**

To state it simply, education has two roles that are intertwined, namely education for making a life and education for making a living. On the one hand, education carries a social fostering role through which the young should develop a democratic, responsible, and critical attitude towards society and their peers. On the other hand, it carries an economic purpose that in the end will produce a workforce sufficient to meet the demand of the liberal marketplace. This mission is supposed to strengthen both the individual employability (in competition with others), and enhance the collective body in the global economic competition. These two «poles» are in one sense contradictory since the social purpose of education is supposed to strengthen our responsibility towards other people (living for the other), while the economical side is supposed to turn us into competitive people in order to meet the demands of the market economy (being before the other). In another sense, the two «poles» merge since it offers the individual a sense of belonging to a social context, which, in turn, strengthens the nation’s competitive force in a global world economy (Månsson, 2010, 2014). We can see this tension being played out in debates about the role of institutionalised education in different countries (Lynch, 2006), and Sweden is no exception (Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2008).

For instance, the educational and political debate about the state of the Swedish school system portrays the Swedish school as in crisis, and as producing students that do not meet the needs of the labour market. The Swedish school is rendered as a school without authority, without discipline, with vague or unclear goals and poorly trained teachers. All these factors are said to contribute to the failure of Swedish schools to meet knowledge demands, and their contribution to the fall in the educational ranking in relation to other OECD countries (Månsson & Säfström, 2010; Lund & Sundberg, 2012; Adolfsson, 2012). The purpose of education, its role in society and what constitutes good education has, of course, during different periods been critically discussed, challenged, tested, and evaluated (Englund, 2005). It seems to us, however, that never before has the very essence of the idea of education as making a life been so deeply challenged. The change of policy for education in Sweden is...
said to be, by policy makers, essential or cru-
cial to meet the challenges of a neo-liberal society and an increasingly globalised eco-

nomic condition (Alliance for Sweden, 2006). In this context, it seems as if the only role left is «education for making a living», i.e. in the last analysis, the up-and-coming generation has to learn how to be individual agents fit for a competitive arena occupied by other individual agents.

That is, learning for «making a living» for oneself fundamentally lacks an idea of change for the self as well as society. Therefore, in all its instances, learning for making a living is the result of what Chantal Mouffe has called part of a «post-political» view in the West. That is, politics without any real antagonisms but rather dealing with distribution of goods as well as rights within what is basically a common worldview. With respect to education it means putting an end to the need to have an alternative opinion, to seeing the world differently. And particular-

ly, this perspective cannot acknowledge that society is split between those who have wealth, power and status and those who have not (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999). In a post-political world, society is considered to be an organic whole, that has naturally de-

veloped over time, and those who stick out in any way from the norm are to be fixed by (always more) information, by (always more) «learning». At worst, they may simply be deemed as unmoral if not willing to learn more (Säfström, 2006, 2015). Our task as educationalists, we want to suggests, is therefore to re-politise education, to bring back, if it was gone, the idea that education funda-

mentally is about social change, and not only about individual gains.

Parallel to the individualisation and mar-
ketisation of education, voices are being raised about a common, or universal, notion of the good teacher, and what counts as valuable knowledge, proper norms and values

in order to secure a sound democratic soci-
ety (Svensson, 2011; Lund & Sundberg, 2012; Adolfsson, 2012). Both liberals, social-dem-
ocrats and conservatives talk about a school in crisis and that more has to be done in or-

der to save the next generation from falling into anti-democratic and populist political movements, which would finally result in a destabilisation of society in its totality. The solution to this crisis, for both liberals, social-democrats and conservatives, is however simple: re-enter the school of knowledge, and make the younger generation ready for higher education and/or a sustainable work-

life in a competitive and global market (Månsson & Säfström, 2010; Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2008).

This solution, however, is not new. The Swedish educational system has always (and is still) characterised by a view of knowledge that is – through specialisation and subject foci – formed by the needs and demands of the market economy (Englund, 2005). In this fairly uni-directional focus on reproduction and competition, education is merely for «making a living», while its social role, or po-
tential for change, is to be understood as be-
ing of lesser importance for the pupils’ fur-
ther development and continuing life, (Månsson & Säfström, 2010; Lund & Sund-
berg, 2012; Adolfsson, 2012). If the solution lies in an increased focus on subjects, special-
isations, order, discipline, and teacher au-

thority, then a fair question would be to ask whether education is about protecting the young from the chaotic world by placing them in an already ordered world, or is it about enhancing the potentiality of changing the conditions producing «the crisis»? For us the answer is evident, there can be no educa-

tion without change, and without education proper no defence for the threats from anti-

democratic and populist movements.

An educational practice that is all too keen on production and reproduction (i.e. educa-
tion for making a living) risks ironically not only giving far too little space for individual development and individual freedom (in order to let the individual grow and speak with his or her own voice); it also preserves its faith in its own traditions. Education becomes limited to what it is possible to say within its own tradition. This discourse rests upon a certain form of epistemological conformity, where certain kinds of knowledge and defined ways of thinking and acting are prioritised over other understandings of knowledge, thinking and acting (Touraine, 2002; Månsson, 2010). In this sense, education is reduced to learning, and the teacher becomes a «knowledge provider»: The pupil learns X because the teacher taught the pupil X. In another sense, learning for making a living places the individual against society, the individual good against the common good, and democracy against economy (c.f. Dewey, 1902). Again, it does so in terms of transmissions of reified knowledge that, in terms of learning, confirms a certain outlook on the world. It is an outlook that fits all to well with a neo-liberal society in which learning to be before the other is emphasised as the very goal of education in a «competitive market».

In what we above called education «for making a life», teaching is all about dealing with «uncertainty and ambivalence» which, according to Zygmunt Bauman (2001:138) «is the proper task for education». Education creates the possibility and dealing with how it is possible «to go on in the face of others who may go on – have the right to go on – differently» (Bauman, 1999:202). That is, teaching is about establishing a particular form of being together with others where it is possible to explore what is not yet established as the truth, where it is possible to open new worlds or new ways of thinking and acting. That is, teaching proper lies beyond indoctrination of what already is the case. Teaching proper opens up the possibility to direct attention to see beyond the limits of a particular tradition or society. In this perspective, teaching is geared towards change since it does not only develop the pupils’ emancipatory capacity; it also makes it possible to cross over borders in order to form social relations (Hargreaves, 2004; Bingham & Biesta, 2010; Säfström, 2014). That is, teaching does not only prepare students for doing what is already set within given limits of the present–day political situation. It is to see beyond those limits in order to imagine a future that is not yet and to bring this image into play in the classroom or lecture hall.

Two tasks ahead

In this article, we have argued that there is a need to shift from learning to teaching in order for education to be something more than making a living for oneself, by focusing on the primary objective of education, that is to «make a life» worth living together with others. To this end, we have emphasised the emancipatory potential of teaching.

What we wish to make problematic is the neglect of teaching in current educational discourses. As we have argued, teaching is what makes education into something more than just an exercise in learning a lesson. Education without a conception of emancipation, we have argued, reduces education to «learning» how to make a living within the borders of the (neo-) liberal market economy. While learning how to make a living indeed can be useful when living in a (neo-) liberal society, it also risks stopping change from occurring. Education without change becomes pure indoctrination of knowledge as reified truths within absolute borders of particular «traditions». Such borders severely reduce not only what makes education something interesting and important and
linked to what teachers actually do, but also the very possibility of «making a life» worth living beyond such borders. Hence, education for making a life, with its ethics of being for the other, might be devastating for a neoliberal market economy since it departs too much from the beaten track; yet it is also necessary in order for education to take place at all. This is, as we understand it, the dilemma of education in our time and therefore motivates the need to claim education back into the public realm. For such a task, we see at least two tasks ahead:

To study critically the rise of «learning» within different contexts, in educational theory as well as in educational policy, and to compare the specificities of diverse traditions of education in the Nordic countries in this respect.

To reconnect education to its interest in emancipation of the other, that is, its interest in «teaching» and to use this interest as a frame for analyses of diverse traditions of educational thought.

Noter

1 Where we are departing from Englund’s (2011) position is that we are not claiming a «normative» framework in order for teaching to be about change, but rather that teaching is internally linked to the very idea of education itself.

References


