

Philosophy in the educational process: Understanding what cannot be taught

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Gregory Loewen, *Hermeneutic Pedagogy: teaching and learning on dialogue and interpretation*, Alcoa: Old Moon Academic Press, 2012

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A human being must learn very much in order to lie, in order to fight his fight for existence: but everything that he learns and does in this respect as an individual still has nothing to do with education.
(Nietzsche 2003:81 [1872])

There was a time when Plato meant to throw the poets out of the town. The reason had to do with educational matters. Nevertheless in real towns it is the poets who are kept and it is the philosophers who are hunted. This reminiscent frustration is likewise a pedagogic issue – in Plato’s time and still in ours. It is not the philosopher’s social role or the presence of philosophy *as such* in society that is the main concern, but how education defines itself and to what extent it determines itself *philosophically*. Philosophy has a radical way of approaching and dealing with knowledge – for instance, it tries to overcome doctrines which do not question themselves and to compensate for the progressive drift of using and expanding knowledge only technically. Philosophy tries to *understand* the world and it is precisely this understanding of experience that represents the ultimate goal that the human being has as a living learning process.

Such an idea is exactly one of the things that Gregory Loewen is trying to convince us of in *Hermeneutic Pedagogy: teaching and learning on dialogue and interpretation*. The book, published in 2012, not only aims to expound the educational process in the hermeneutical tradition, but is also an essay on the educational model the author calls the *hermeneutical circle of experiential pedagogy*. Loewen elaborates a conception of learning which considers the dynamic relations between the conservative, the technical and the moral dimensions of education.

Whereas “What is generally called education tends to separate beings from one another and from their common existential envelope of humanity” – the political sphere from the personal one, the objectivity from subjectivity –, Loewen underlines the interdependence and the perpetual dialogue between these three dimensions. He calls these dimensions: *hexis*, *praxis* and *phronesis*. The entire book works with these three concepts and the author dedicates a chapter to each: chapter two *Hexis – What students bring to overcome*; chapter three *Praxis – what attempts the overcoming of previous prejudice*; and chapter *Phronesis – experience and knowledge as practical wisdom*. A first chapter of the book is meant as an extensive introduction, where we experience a short but broad journey into Heidegger’s realm of Daseins’ analysis, in which we also meet Gadamer, Ricoeur, Dewey and Adorno.

How does the author, an anthropologist by profession, define the above-mentioned three concepts? *Hexis* stands for traditional customs and the concept describes how we borrow behaviours and beliefs from our ancestors. It also discusses how this heritage is a constituent factor of education. Thus *hexis* refers to the very social dimension of education, to the aspiration for reproduction and conservation of cultures or societies.

Custom is only a first step in the dialectical process of learning. As Bob Dylan said, “The times they are a-changin’”. Not only do we forget and alter what we are taught, but also come to contest. “Customs are reinterpreted, theory adjusted to suit reality, the social reality of tradition is reshaped, and the episteme of the serious business of constructing knowledge

takes on its new historical task.” The second step of a learning process is *praxis* applied theory. Its aim is to expand knowledge, to use it for progressive purposes. The institutions, says Loewen, are now the medium through which a paradigm comes into being.

While ‘repetition’ is the key word for *hexis* and ‘extension’ for *praxis*, the process of learning fulfils itself in *phronesis* or practical knowledge. “While custom presents a ready-made reality for our consumption and oblation, and theory presents to us the revolution of consciousness that overturns that world, practical wisdom shines upon the light of worldliness, the way in which the world worlds itself.” Through *phronesis* the hermeneutical circle of experiential pedagogy, as Loewen calls it, closes and accomplishes itself. It enlightens the other two constitutive dimensions, it puts them into question and reveals the abilities they do not capture, but which are central to the human being as a learning being. *Phronesis* names the radical learning experience that one individual has, experience which cannot be taught. Because it puts all that one can teach or study in another light, it is a hermeneutical experience *par excellence*.

According to Loewen all of this is a “learning that has nothing to do with education.” Which is to say that this is the very expression of how human life is lived – in its ongoingness, in its play of certainties, beliefs and doubts, in its dialectic of hope and disappointment, in its repeated revaluation. This idea recalls the Hegelian concept of experience Gadamer redefined. “Such experiences cut into the heart of what we thought was true, and reorder our expectations, both of ourselves and of others”, says Loewen.

We remember that this kind of experience is negative: one has to give up one’s own knowledge while searching for the truth and at the same time recognize its intangibility; one comes furthermore to make the experience furthermore of supra-individual structures which determine the experience of the world. It is not *I* who is making this experience, but that which precedes me, that which is beyond me as an individual. As Loewen puts it, this learning experience concerns not only important biographic facts, which define one’s individuality, but

a horizon that exceeds the individual limitations and which makes learning possible. In this sense, Loewen speaks of “looking into yourself while looking beyond yourself”. In another part, he argues that we have to recognize that we are but parts of a whole. This relation is also valid vice versa: That which we do as individuals has significant consequences for the whole, even “to whom I appear to have no living connection.” This idea is the point of departure for ethics and therefore *phronesis* initiates moral knowledge in the form of an ethical dialogue.

This form of dialogue in which *phronesis* fulfils itself has an open character: it recognizes its own perspectivism and it is always ready to reevaluate. *Phronesis* is aware of both the deep historical dimension in which it finds itself and the finitude of experience. By contrast, science aims, says Loewen, the “supra-human prosthesis” and custom manifests the desire of a culture to stay in course, beyond the individual and time. But recognizing the mortal character of phenomena makes freedom possible. Thus *Phronesis* also appears to be the expression of worldly wisdom. It opens a hermeneutical horizon in which what is at once given and what may come, *hexis* and *praxis*, are understood in their relativity, brought into question and at the same time acknowledged as constitutive dimensions of education.

What Loewen argues in his book is eventually the relevance of a hermeneutical discourse in the field of pedagogy. While he tries to embrace many areas and perspectives, he stresses the importance of what we may call wisdom, thinking and understanding in the learning process. It is not just a purely philosophical work, it also relates to practical pedagogic issues by providing examples of students’ testimonies to their learning experience and perception of professors.

Hermeneutics appear then not only as a tool for understanding education, but also as the self-realization of learning. Being conscious of what learning actually is enhances the learning process, it perfects it. In other words, authentic learning is understanding learning and relating deliberately to it. “The process, by which we attain the higher forms of humanity, is that of learning and thence understanding. The

prior prejudice of the world as it has been is overturned by hermeneutic experience.”

The philosophical idea that drives him in this undertaking is that bringing into consciousness the structures and conditions that determined the own experience in the first place. What is gained through this process is what we call self-knowledge: “Phronesis sees through the practicality of repetition and extension by seeing them as rationalizations for the world as it has been. In its subtle but forceful presence, the wisdom of reflective practice asks us to stand outside of the dominion of discourse, the caveat of custom, and move ourselves into the brightest human light of self-understanding anew.”

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