

## THE ONTOLOGY OF LEARNING, OR TEACHING THE NON-PERSON TO LEARN

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### Resumo

Neste artigo, exploramos algumas consequências da atual obsessão com a "aprendizagem" e como tal obsessão parece fazer todo o sentido para uma educação exclusivamente com o objetivo de ganhar a vida numa economia neoliberal. Em vez de celebrar aspectos económicos da aprendizagem, destacamos a importância de construir capacidades democráticas num mundo em constante mudança, trazendo a educação de volta para o domínio público. As perspectivas oferecidas neste artigo devem ser considerados como contributos teóricos e críticos para a discussão sobre as circunstâncias educacionais atuais, em que discursos de aprendizagem parecem dominar todo o campo da educação.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação; Ciências da aprendizagem; Não-pessoa; Mercado.

### Abstract

In this article we explore some consequences of present day obsession with "learning" and how such obsession seems to make perfect sense for an education exclusively aiming at making a living in a neo-liberal economy. Instead of celebrating the economical aspects of learning, we highlight the importance of building democratic capacities in an ever changing world by taking education back to the public. The perspectives offered in this article are to be considered as theoretical and critical contributions to the discussion about current educational circumstances, in which discourses of learning seem to dominate the entire field of education.



**Keywords:** Education; Learning sciences; Non-person; Market.

## Introduction

In this article we explore some consequences of present day obsession with learning and how such obsession seems to make perfect sense for an education exclusively aiming at making a living in a neo-liberal economy. We deal with the limits of learning by taking Sweden as a case, since educational policy in Sweden so openly and passionately have been driven by neo-liberal market values marked by a tightly structured reformation of diverse educational systems together with a continuing marketisation of educational infrastructure, from Kindergarten to higher education (Alliance for Sweden, 2006).

More specifically, we are interested in how learning, with its conceptual history rooted in psychology, came to be understood as a key concept for education from early 2000 and on, not only in all the Nordic countries (Rubensson, 2006) but in Europe at large (Biesta, 2006; Sawyer, 2006). It is not that learning was new for education, but what was new was the establishment of new theories of learning, accompanied by new learning technologies and policies. What particularly can be recognised is a shift from emphasising democracy to stressing the importance of learning and knowledge, and where knowledge is characterised by innovation, specialisation and subject foci, adapted by the needs and demands of the market economy (Lundvall, 2010).

Some of the key factors for this sudden rise of symbolic capital for learning will be explored – a capital that was invested in, not only in research and research carriers but also by departments, universities, business, politics etc. The term became the ('new') name on such diverse things as research programs and groups, courses, programs, technologies, strategies, desires as well as rooted in political programs and rhetoric's, school policies and popular discourses on education. If one takes the European conference on educational research (ECER) in Gothenburg 2008, which had as its theme from teaching to learning, as a sign of this shift, one can suspect a shift in educational research agendas all over Europe. As Krejsler, Olsson and Petersson (2014) shows, this what can be called synchronized shift to learning in educational research, is fed by an increasing influence on national educational policies through The Bologna process, OECD and the EU. In their conclusion Krejsler, Olsson and Petersson (2014) claim that the pressure to make educational systems comparable all



throughout EU increases the need in each and every European country to develop similar “templates to make diplomas and *learning outcomes* comparable” (p. 182, emphasis added). That is, such a pressure not only reduces variation of possible knowledge produced but also, by focusing on the outcomes of *learning* both emphasize learning as the key concept as well as making it empty: Learning is only a process leading to certain desirable effects in terms of equalized outcomes all throughout EU. Moreover, research accompanying those intentions to equalize outcomes of standardized templates for learning is largely a “neo-positivist and quantitative-inspired approach to an evidence for what works paradigm” (Krejsler et. al., 2014, p. 182. See also Biesta, 2007, 2010a; Krejsler 2013).

So if the analysis of Krejsler (et. al., 2014) is right it means that the shift from teaching to learning discourse in educational research tend to be a sign of both a shift in research paradigms as well as a shift in strategies for state-driven research funding agencies concerning directions for educational research in diverse European states. It is in other words a sign of a fundamental shift in educational political policy if not world wide so at least within the EU. According to Krejsler (et al., 2014) what those politically instituted processes and institutions have in common is the joint force to promote educational reforms aiming at preparation of the citizen to join the work market in a globally competing market economy.

Since the concept of learning, transformed to discourse, tends to rule out teaching as a foundational concept for education in favour for its own self-centered logic, it has become almost impossible to criticise, or to be against learning (Biesta, 2005; Contu, Grey & Örténblad, 2003). However, since learning is significant as part of a wider understanding of the role of education, as being linked to individual performance and the needs of the market (Contu, Grey & Örténblad, 2003), we argue that this makes it possible to argue that learning is not neutral. Learning is rather grounded in its own ideological limits, which in turn makes it possible to readdress the question of the purpose and need of public education. We argue, in this article and elsewhere, for the need to reclaim public education in which education is not only to prepare the individual for a job market and for competing in a global economy but that education also is for fostering the democratic citizen able to exercise his or her democratic duties and rights for the benefit of all. We also claim that the latter implies that educational research’s orientation towards learning need to be scrutinized and a counter discourse established. We see this article as a contribution to such a counter discourse.



What we want to explore more in detail then, is what the wide spread of an ideology of learning, in research and educational policies, possibly can mean for what is possible to understand as education proper in current socio/political context of education: What makes perfect sense in explaining what learning is all about in the public domain as well as in policy and research? For doing this we are developing and trying out some educational concepts in order to analyzing socio/political aspects of education and educational policies, particularly learning/limits and education for making a living and education for making a life.

The article unfolds in three parts. In the first part we highlight the relationship between educational sciences, as described by the Swedish Committee for educational sciences and learning sciences, that is, we particularly show how the term learning dominates descriptions of the field of educational sciences. In the second part we illuminate the relationship between learning and the market. In this section we show how the social role of education has been replaced with learning as individual academic performance and how this shift is related to the economical demands of the market. In the third part we offer an alternative and emancipatory view on education.

### **Learning Everything**

As we stated above, the psychological term learning has since the beginning of 2000 dominating the intellectual landscape of pedagogik in Sweden. A quite visible result of this domination and popularity of learning-psychology is the formation of the Committee for Educational Sciences (Utbildningsvetenskapliga kommittén) within the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). In its official text announcing the area for research in educational sciences the influence of the term learning is presented as obvious and self-evident only hegemonic ideas can be. The following is our translation of the Swedish text:

Educational sciences (utbildningsvetenskap) can for example be about *learning* of different contents, about the connection between the character of the content, teaching and *learning* or about *learning* in different social cultural and institutional surroundings, including work life. It can be about multiplicity of *learning* and memory, such as sex, ethnicity, social background, talent, physical disability etc. or *learning* in different stages of life, that is, life-long *learning*. Other examples are research about the effects of teaching innovations, and how educational reforms and informal *learning* works under influence of social, economical and political circumstances (Swedish



Research Council, February/Mars 2014, *emphasis added by the authors*).

A quick analysis shows the term learning mentioned seven (7!) times in an eight lines short text. It is by far the most repeated term. In contrast the term teaching is mentioned two (2!) times and then as already linked to and framed by learning within institutions. Furthermore, teaching tends to be understood in this text in terms of being innovative in relation to educational reforms and what is called informal learning. That is, being innovative is linked to and framed by the nature and content of political educational reforms. What goes on in society, history and culture at large are understood in terms of social, economical and political circumstances and what effects those phenomena have on informal learning. That is *all processes* in life outside as well inside institutions are understood, and can be explained in terms of learning according to this text: Or to be precise, all processes in life can, and maybe also should, be *controlled* by learning.

What makes this a problem, then? For one thing, what is called educational sciences seems more correctly to be described in terms of learning sciences, particularly since education is not mentioned in relation to its intellectual content as a tradition of thought, but in terms of political reforms, that is, as one (of many) object(s) of study. Instead of education as a particular intellectual/critical tradition of thought the term learning colonializes all aspects of the text. So if we are right in claiming that learning is not a neutral term at all then it means that educational research are colonized by a particular ideology of learning. And that is a problem, not only for educational research but also for society at large.

It is particularly a problem if one recall John Dewey's (1902, 1916/1966) insisting that what a teacher can and should have control over is his or her teaching. Teaching can be planned, organised, contextualised and set into motion. His warning was that if we are trying to control in a total sense what the students actually learn, and not only controlling what, how and why we teach – then we are at a risk of exercising control of individual beings and their lives in the world rather than educating them. That will only lead to, according to Dewey a reduction of education to become mere incalculation, subordination and adjustment to a society already given and fixed. That is to a situation, which would not only lead to bad education but also to a repressive society hindering change.

To hinder change was the ultimate sin for Dewey since it would ultimately destroy the capacity for life itself. Change for Dewey was the very thing essential for the



continuing growth of mankind but also the defining characteristic of a democracy: a society is democratic to the extent it secures its capacity for change. For Dewey control in education was rather about your own self, a tool necessary for teaching, for being a teacher, and something one needed in order to master teaching and absolutely not a tool to be used to control students learning in an absolute sense. Student's creativity was to be set free for the benefit of society, not to be controlled by subordinating them under the weight of the given. This was absolutely necessary for Dewey, because a healthy democratic society uses its creative and collective intelligence to change itself in the name of equality and justice (Säfström, 2012).

A totalising ideology of learning in which learning is a term to describe all processes in life to be controlled is with Dewey not only a problem for education but is also a problem for society at large since, as we have seen, it lays the very ground for a repressive non-democratic society. What Dewey convincingly shows in his writings is the close connection between educational relations and the way society organise itself. This connection between the way in which educational relations are understood and its consequences for society is also present in Jacques Rancière's writings, especially in his book (1991) "The ignorant schoolmaster". In this book, without going into detail about it, Rancière exposes the risk for education to lapse into repression and control of students in a total sense through what he calls stultification, that is to make students stupid, by taking away from them the very understanding of what they themselves can learn regardless of the institutions and theories set up to control and explain their learning. With Rancière to learn is absolutely separated from being institutionally or psychologically defined, there is no theory of learning. Rather in a similar vein as Dewey, Rancière claim that 'a teacher' need to leave the kids alone in the sense that what she or he can do is to motivate, direct attention and to demand work, but not control what, how and why they learn. That is to teach in a way so as to prepare situations for emancipation and not stultification (see further Säfström, 2007, 2011, 2013; Masschelein & Simons 2011; Bingham & Biesta 2010).

In the following, we take a closer look at the term learning through learning sciences as they are described in some influential texts on the matter (Bransford et al., 2000; Sawyer, 2006). We intend to make clear some obvious links between learning sciences and the way The Committee for Educational Sciences in Sweden describes



its field of research.<sup>1</sup>

### **Learning Scientific Learning**

Learning as a general term in learning sciences signifies a process in which the self expands by inhabiting the environment, which consequently becomes: “the learning environment” (Bransford et al., 2000; Sawyer, 2006). Such an environment can either take the form of an institution as for example a school or appearing as a conceptual space anywhere, or both (even though they do not necessarily coincide). More specifically, the learning environment signifies a *controlled* environment.

The learner, in learning sciences, is someone who appropriates knowledge in order to expand the controlled environment within which he or she can deal with problems in a more effective way. From this follows three things: Firstly, the learner by constituting herself as someone who learns becomes part of a specific environment in which this learning is taking place. Secondly, such an environment by being a controlled environment controls the learner as much as the learner is controlling it, and, thirdly, solving problems is not outside the self but the very way in which the self becomes part of the learning environment. To solve problems effectively in a learning environment then, means to speed up the very process through which the self is constituted as a “learner”, at the same time controlled by and controlling a particular environment. This analysis also explains why transfer is a main concern for learning sciences, since transfer signifies the very possibility of expansion of the self though problem solving in different contexts.

The aim of learning in the learning sciences then is to gain adaptive expertise, the possibility to apply one’s knowledge in an indefinite number of contexts and situations. In the language of the learning sciences the learner is a metacognitive agent (or star!), *i.e.* the self is able to direct learning processes by reflection in order to achieve specific learning goals. From inside the ideology of learning sciences, the learning subject knows what she wants to know and is to experience her learning as an optimization of her ways of dealing with real-world problems. That is, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> For the analysis of learning sciences we are indebted to Hans Schildermann, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven who did the study on which this section of the text is based during his internship at Södertörn University fall 2013, under the guidance of Carl Anders Säfström, Södertörn and Jan Masschelein, Leuven.



experience her learning as such an optimization she already needs to have inhabited the learning environment within which she knows what she wants to know through reflection over real-world problems, produced by the very same learning environment. As a result, the self as learner is always being extended through an intensifying involvement in and awareness of the learning environment: An environment in its totality controlled and controlling the constitution of the self as well as the reality in which the self is constituted.

If learning sciences is the true meaning of educational sciences then not only learning but also educational research in general is severely limited by such science because in order for research to be explanatory within educational sciences, for research to make sense, it need to reflect a particular ontology of learning. What tends to be established through learning sciences is an ontology of learning, making learning sciences into the prime tool for establishing a particular self as well as her reality. Learning, in other words is reduced to a process of pure ideology transfer. If that is the case what type of ideology then is learning sciences transferable with?

### **The Marketisation of Education**

Even if learning has become the hot topic within educational sciences, the language of learning has, through the spectres of neo-liberal glasses, affected the society in large (*c.f.* Contu, Grey & Örténblad, 2003; Beach, 2012). It seems that the promise of learning not only ruled out teaching, but also the public part of education (*c.f.* Lynch, 2006). The latter have serious consequences for democracy and change since such an educational system is neglecting skills that are essential to keep the emancipatory potential of education alive.

To state it simple, education has two roles that are intertwined, namely education for making a life and education for making a living. On one hand education carries a public role through which the student should develop a democratic, responsible, and critical attitude towards society and their peers. On the other hand it carries an economical purpose that in the end will produce a workforce sufficient to meet the demand of the liberal market. 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 make us to competitive people in order to meet the demands of the market economy (being *before* the other). In another sense these poles merge together since it offers the sole



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). Even though, the tension between making a life and making a living is not to be understood as a struggle between *either* making a life *or* making a living, we can see this tension being played out in debates about the purpose, role in society and what constitutes good education in different countries, and Sweden is no exception (Englund, 2005; Månsson & Säfström, 2010; Månsson, 2014).

For instance, the educational and political debate about the state of the Swedish school system portrayed the Swedish as in crisis, and producing students that do not meet the needs of the labour market. The Swedish school in addition is portrayed as a school without authority, without discipline, with blurry goals, poorly trained teachers, and so forth. All these factors is stressed contribute to the failure of Swedish school, to meet knowledge demands, falling in the educational ranking in relation to other OECD countries (Månsson & Säfström, 2010; Månsson, 2014; Säfström, 2014).

The hallmark of this debate is the fusion of neo-conservative values and neo-liberal market values. At the same time and as briefly noted earlier, the Swedish educational system is experiencing the full force and effect of marketisation where multinational companies have become major actors in the field. This expansion of market forces is legitimised in the name of free choice, competition and individuality (Beach, 2012). Parallel to this development, critical voices are being raised about a common, or universal, notion on the good teacher, valuable knowledge, and proper norms and values (Lund & Sundberg, 2012). Both liberals and conservatives are talking about a school in crisis and that more has to be done in order to save the young generation. The solution to this crisis is although simple: re-enter the school of knowledge, where the young ones are to be formed to subject oriented and knowledge carrying subject ready for higher education and/or a sustainable work-life in a competitive and global market (Englund, 2005; Månsson, 2014).

Such solution seems to be limited to an instrumental rationality based on the assumption that the end goal is given. That what constitutes good education, as Biesta (2010) says, is self-evident and clear already, without even asking the question, what education is or can be, beyond preparing for the right man to the right place in the work-force. What is particularly missing, says Biesta, is the subjectification role of education that is that individuals are both shaping and are shaped by educational processes in socio/political contexts and that they thereby win their freedom to act in



social and political contexts (see further Biesta, 2010).

This solution, where instrumental rationality motivates what knowledge is good for, is, however, not new. The Swedish educational system has always (and still is) characterised by a view on knowledge that is – through specialisation and subject foci – adapted by the needs and demands of the market economy (Englund, 2005). In this fairly one-way directed focus on reproduction and competition education is merely for making a living, while its social role is to be understood as lesser important for the students further development and continuing life (Månsson & Säfström, 2010; Månsson, 2014). The educational task of making subjectification of individuals possible through subjecting them to critical, social and political contexts are limited to get students willingly to accept their assigned roles within those contexts.

The purpose of education, its role in society and what constitutes good education has during different periods been critically discussed, challenged, tested, valued, and so forth. It seems to us that never before has the very essence of the idea of education as making a life been so heavily challenged. The change of policy for education in Sweden are said to be, by policy makers, essential or crucial to meet the challenges of a neo-liberal society and an increasingly globalised economic condition (Säfström, Månsson & Osman, in press). In this discourse education is subordinated to the need of the post industrial economy and its primary function is conceived as to supply qualified labor forces in order to compete in the increasingly globalised economy (*c.f.* Hargreaves, 2003).

The most apparent trend for education, in order to be a viable knowledge producing and consuming partner is to accept the rules of the market economy and play the game accordingly to it (*c.f.* Bauman, 2001). This change leads to (what might be called) a marketisation of education (comparable to Georg Ritzers (1993) thesis on *The McDonaldization of Society*), since it is more or less neglecting skills that are essential to keep democratic and public life alive. What is happening is that the educational system (or the educational market) is being asked to produce commercially oriented individuals rather than to educate public-oriented persons (*c.f.* Lynch, 2006). Learning is for now, and fit for a particular economical order of society, and is not about education for social togetherness but limited to oneself in order to compete against everyone else.

Education has, so to speak, to learn from the private sector (*i.e.* the market), in order to clarify its social usefulness. The main expression of a management that



focuses on apparent goals, cost efficacy, usefulness, and quality is *New Public Management*. This form of management is characterised by a strong institutionalised leadership, a hierarchical chain of decision making, where the collegial structures has been replaced in favor to a more hierarchical, goal oriented and policy ridden leadership. In the learning environment of New Public Management there is less time for an education focusing on the structures that education for making a life are made of, they do not fit the neo-liberal imperatives of employability, competitiveness and individuality (*c.f.* Askling & Stensaker, 2002), through which the learner is to establish a particular learning-self.

Learning, as understood through learning sciences and New Public Management, severely restricts the possibility of education for making a life and becomes strictly connected to education for making a living. And as such, learning equals individual performance and learning outcomes in a neo-liberal market economy and the learning-self mirrors whatever performance and outcomes desirable within such economy. It becomes apparent then that an ontology of learning in such a context is neither without limits nor neutral it is rather an expression of a particular learning environment establishing a certain learning-self, understood through the logic of the market place.

### **The Learning-Self as a Non-Person**

The economisation of education in terms of the provision of learning opportunities and the result is measured in learning outcomes defines, through the ideology of learning sciences the learner as an autonomous self. In this respect, education has become an inherent part of the neo-liberal economy. In a learning environment where knowledge is taken for granted and is for now, learning outcomes are measured only as a result from a learning process without any considerations of different economical and social contexts in which the knowledge production (or re-production) actually is taking place. The learning self becomes within this learning environment a non-person – a nameless object which knowledge is measured and valued in relation to the official definition of the national educational attainments.

Within such a learning environment that follows the logic of the marketplace, learning seems to limit the learner to a singular learning-self, a non-person in competition with everyone else; it defines knowledge as a commodity for this competition; it defines knowledge exclusively as that which is in line with the current



demands of the labour market; finally it defines learning and learning processes in terms of steering and leadership (Askling & Stensaker, 2002; Contu, Grey & Örtenblad, 2003). The non-self or the learning-self, in other words, is led or steered through controlled processes of learning in which the self constitutes itself through optimization of her dealings with real-world problems in an ever expanding learning environment.

Within this curiously self-centred logic of the non-person, linked to individual performances and economical gains, a third learning/limit comes to mind. A learning environment that is all too keen on reproduction risks not only giving far too little space for individual development and individual freedom (in order to let the individual grow and speak with her own voice) it also preserves, through ideology transfer, the faith in its own tradition (Månsson, 2010, 2014). In other words, Education, and its teaching and learning processes, becomes limited to what it is possible to do and say within its own learning environment. Learning, as established through learning sciences, is, as we stated above, not neutral but grounded in its own ideological limits. The particular self that the learner is supposed to establish, the non-person through a certain ontology of learning places the individual against society, the private against the public and democratic *mores* against economical values (*c.f.* Dewey, 1902; Månsson, 2014). Again, it does so in terms of transmissions of reified knowledge, that is, in terms of learning a specific content that confirms a certain outlook on the world. That is, content that meets the needs and purposes of the market economy turning the self therein into a learning-self a non-person an empty vessel to be filled by the shifting demands of the (neo-liberal) state.

To conclude, the marketization of education imposes a model of learning that prioritises the acquisition of key and transferable skills. The language of learning makes teachers become knowledge providers and the process of teaching is limited to learning outcomes. Those outcomes in turn, are valued in relation to potential economic productivity as its ideological context and thereby giving meaning to whatever knowledge/outcomes are produced in and by education.

### **Concluding Remarks: Bridging Borders**

In this article we have discussed learning, as established through learning sciences, as a phenomenon and a process transferable to the logic of the marketplace. As such, learning is not neutral but is grounded in its own ideological limits and these limits affect not only the self that the learner is supposed to establish but also the



learners' worldview (or ideology). In other words, through an ontology of learning, established by learning sciences, education is all about acquisition of key and transferable skills. Teachers are supposed to be knowledge providers and the process of teaching is limited to learning outcomes. Those outcomes in turn, are valued in relation to potential economic productivity as its ideological context and thereby giving meaning to whatever knowledge or learning outcomes are produced in and by education. That is, the learning/limits within education for making a living indicates that learning becomes a matter of wealth acquisition or mainly understood as a means to personal gain in the market place, rather than contributing to a public good and processes of subjectification.

So far our discussion has mainly focused on the limits on learning and on education as making a living, and we would like to end our paper with a short exploration of the more public part of education since it shows a potentiality that is seriously underdeveloped in present day education.

Education for making a life does not only develop the student's intellectual capital, it also develops their capacity to bridge over borders and form (new) social relations in a changing world (*c.f.* Hargreaves, 2004). It does not only prepare students for doing what is already set within given limits of the present day political situation, but 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 (Säfström, 2014). Education for making a life is what gives room for the individual to take place as an acting responsible person together with others in a situation marked by uncertainty and ambivalence which, according to Bauman (2001, p. 138) "is the proper task for education". Education for making a life marked by uncertainty and ambivalence necessary for change is 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, p. 222).

The economy of learning/limits within education for making a life is expressed as a particular form of being together with others in which it is possible to explore what is not yet established as the truth, or that which that opens new worlds, new ways of thinking and acting. That is, education proper for education for life is beyond indoctrination of what already is the case, and that can direct attention to what there is to see beyond the limits of a particular tradition, or society. It is geared towards change, and its limits set by others right of going on differently in exploring unknown territory.



Education as dealing with uncertainty and ambivalence is not a question of learning, but a question of emancipation (Säfström, 2011). It means among other things that education is not primarily about incorporating the students into a social world in order for them to only perform their socially assigned roles. That is, education is not primarily about explaining for students who they are in the division of labour and/or as social beings, but to verify who they are already beyond such divisions. Hence, education for making a life, with its ethics of being-for the other, might be devastating for a neo-liberal market economy since it departs too much from the beaten track, but 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 to the public.

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