Rethinking Schooling Through the “Logic” of Emergence: Some thoughts on planned enculturation and educational responsibility

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People learn many things regardless of whether they are in schools or not. It is therefore safe to say that learning takes place all the time. But is this education? Supporters of some extreme forms of progressive education might argue that it is. But it could also be argued that education is different from unguided learning in that it directs the kind of learning that takes place. In this way education intentionally shapes the subjectivity of those being educated and this is achieved through the curriculum. The curriculum places conditions on learning and any curriculum which does not place such conditions could be considered uneducational. Furthermore, educators who do not manage to create environments (curricula) that are able to direct the subjectivity of those being educated in a particular way must be considered to have failed in their responsibility to educate.

But if education is educational precisely because it shapes the subjectivity of those being educated then it is impossible to distinguish this conception of education from planned enculturation or training. It would seem, therefore, that if we want to separate the concept of education from that of unguided learning, we are then lumped with a conception of education as planned enculturation. This introduces a problem. The problem is that in contemporary multicultural societies there are ethical and political issues around decisions about which or whose culture people should be trained into through education. Who decides this and on what grounds? Whose knowledge or culture is of most worth (Apple, 1993)? It is precisely in this regard that we believe complexity science can be of help to educators because it shows how it is possible to keep the notion of education as structured guidance without using it as a tool for planned enculturation. How is this possible?

For a start, it is important to remember that the idea of planned enculturation assumes that it is possible to use the educational curriculum to instill knowledge of a particular kind of culture. It relies, in other words, on the idea that knowledge being “transmitted” (by means of the curriculum) reflects or replicates something that already exists (i.e., something that lies “behind” knowledge itself), which in turn relies on a representational understanding of knowledge and meaning (knowledge “represents” that which lies “behind” knowledge). There are, however, strong arguments against representational epistemology which we do not have the space to go into here. Suffice to say contemporary epistemologies (e.g., constructivism, pragmatism, poststructuralism, deconstruction) hold that knowledge and meaning do not represent something that already exists, but “emerges” as we participate in the world and does not exist except in our participatory actions (Osberg, Biesta and Cilliers, in press). We suggest that these epistemologies could be called “emergentist” epistemologies. Since planned enculturation is tied to representational epistemology, it seems likely that alternative, emergentist epistemologies could “free” education from the logic of planned enculturation.

While many attempts have been made to rethink schooling in terms of emergentist epistemologies, we would argue that all these attempts fail to “overcome” representational epistemology because they leave in tact the idea that the function of schooling is to replicate in

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the learner knowledge *of* some pre-conceived “way of being.” Gregory Ulmer, for example (see Ulmer, 1985), proposes a “pedagogy of invention” which he claims is organized around an emergentist epistemology because it suggests that the purpose of a pedagogical presentation or “performance” is not to transfer a message or replicate the meaning of the presentation in the receiver, but to provoke the receiver to respond to the presentation and so bring forth a wider reading of the presentation itself. For Ulmer, the pedagogical presentation should *generate* rather than *transmit* meaning. It is in this sense that Ulmer’s “pedagogy of invention” makes use of an emergentist epistemology (i.e., meaning “emerges” from the pedagogical presentation) but this does *not* mean his pedagogy is freed from the logic of planned enculturation. This is evident in the following remark:

> [a pedagogy of invention is] intended not only to show people the principles of creativity and how to put them into practice but also ... to stimulate the desire to create (not necessarily in “art” but in the lived, sociopolitical world) (Ulmer, 1985, p. 264).

Ulmer, in other words, wants to use the curriculum to *transmit* the “principles of creativity.” He wants to produce people who are creative but in doing this he is still channeling the human subject in a pre-determined direction, which means his pedagogy is still a form of planned enculturation.

At this point we could give up and say that it is not possible to free education from the logic of planned enculturation because being an educator is precisely about directing the subjectivity of others towards some cultural end (“way of being”). To give up the attempt to direct the subjectivity of others is to give up education, which would mean there is no way for an emergentist conception of meaning to manifest in an educational context. But we believe there is another way out, and it lies in applying the idea of emergence not only to knowledge but to human subjectivity itself. We need a conception of human subjectivity which leaves open the question of what it means to be a human subject (see Biesta 2006). When we no longer assume we know what we are starting with, then there is no way to work out a course of action that causes what we are starting with to end up where we want it to be. This means we can no longer implement a program of planned enculturation. But how do we leave open the question of what it means to be a human subject? How do we move from a representational conception of human subjectivity, which understands the human subject in terms of *what* it is, to an emergentist conception, which leaves open the question of what it means to be a human subject?

One theorist whose understanding of human subjectivity could be called an emergentist understanding is Hannah Arendt. Arendt frames human subjectivity in terms of “beginning something new” (Arendt, 1958, p.157). For Arendt, when we begin something we “show ourselves” in the human world as we do when we are born. However, the subjectivity that we reveal through our beginnings is never purely our own because our beginnings are always “contaminated” by the beginnings of others who are making their own beginnings. We are therefore never the sole author or producer of the subjectivity that we “reveal” through our beginnings. Furthermore, because none of us lives with the same set of others (whose own beginnings contaminate our beginnings) this understanding of subjectivity suggests that being with others who frustrate our actions is the only condition in which we can show ourselves in our uniqueness. With this understanding we can begin to understand human subjectivity not in terms of *what* it is, but in terms of *where* the human subject emerges (it “emerges” as it participates in the world and does not exist except in its participatory actions) or, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s words “comes into presence” (Nancy, 1991, p. 7). According to Nancy this “coming into presence” is always a unique event, something that “takes place” and so the subject that comes into presence is always unique, a singular “who” rather than a case of something more general. We could
therefore say that an emergentist understanding of human subjectivity is concerned not with *what* a human subject is but with *who* it is.

When we try to understand people in terms of *who* they are, rather than *what* they are we no longer have a clear starting point or foundation for curriculum theorizing and planning because we can never know who we are dealing with. This is because the “*who*” that we are dealing with only emerges in our interaction with them not before or after. For the same reason we can no longer plan a curriculum that aims at some cultural ideal determined in advance. But the loss of a starting point or foundation for the curriculum does not mean that the notion of curriculum is unimportant or that we can no longer theorize about education. It means, rather, that we must theorize education as a trajectory *without* foundations (Biesta 1999, 2004b). If human subjectivity emerges in a space of radical contingency – which is a space in which the notion of foundations has no place – then this space is still a *curricular* space, and so it is still possible to theorize education *as* the (foundationless) space in which the human subject emerges or “comes into presence” (Biesta 2006, in press). This space could be called a “space of emergence.”

The first thing to notice about the curriculum as a “space of emergence” is that it is not a space of common ground. Because human subjectivity emerges only when one acts with others who are different and who frustrate our beginnings (Arendt 1958, Biesta 1999), this means education only takes place where “otherness” – being with others who are different from us – creates such a space. Educators therefore have a responsibility “to make sure there are at least opportunities within education to meet and encounter who and what is different, strange and other” (Biesta 2004a, p. 322).

Another consequence of understanding education as taking place in a “space of emergence” is that it becomes necessary to acknowledge that situations in which it is difficult or impossible to become the master of our own actions are the very situations which are conducive to the emergence of human subjectivity. The educator is therefore responsible *for making education difficult*, for facing people with difficult and uncomfortable challenges which unsettle the doings and understandings of those being educated (Biesta 2001). This is contrary to conventional educational logic where it is believed necessary to simplify rather than complicate educational content in order to aid the understanding of those being educated.

Last, if educators are responsible for maintaining a space of emergence, then this implies they are *not* responsible for socializing people into a common way of life, but rather for allowing people to emerge as singular and unique beings (Biesta 1997). This is very different from conventional understandings of education where the purpose of the curriculum has been to “iron-out” any idiosyncrasies, such that those being educated can develop in the “right” way. Conventional school curricula are designed specifically to produce similar and interchangeable units. The objective is to make people part of a system, the structure of which is decided in advance, so that when one part of that system wears out it can be replaced by another just like it. If we hold that education is about the emergence of human subjectivity then such curricula must be seen as uneducational. We do not mean to suggest that there is no place for training. Only we could perhaps distinguish it from “education.” Our conception of education – unlike traditional conceptions which try to use education to produce interchangeable units – is about people being able to emerge as unique and irreplaceable beings each able to make a unique contribution. Education, in other words, is about the invention or renewal of culture, rather than the replication of a particular cultural ideal.

What we have tried to argue here is that with the concept of emergence it becomes possible to distinguish educational practices from unguided learning on the one hand, where no attempt is
made to direct the subjectivity of those doing the learning and from planned enculturation on the other, where an attempt is made to channel people into a specific culture or way of life. Since both unguided learning and planned enculturation are problematic from an educational perspective, it would seem that the concept of emergence has an important contribution to make to educational theory and practice.

References


