

Understanding Emerson's Self-Reliance in Terms of Education with a Focus on Language Didactics

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Abstract

Education has always been at the heart of most, if not all, human endeavours. This explains the growing interest of many scholars in educational issues. *Self-Reliance*, one of Emerson's most impressive and influential works, provides an outstanding contribution to education in general and particularly to the personal development of individuals in society. The relevance of the educational values addressed in *Self-Reliance* makes it an appropriate context for academic reflection. This paper scrutinises the educational dimension of Emerson's work with a focus on language didactics. My concern is to provide evidence that the educational values expressed instruct didactics. The study of *Self-Reliance* reveals the expression of some values, the main ones being trust, responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy, independence, self-esteem, self-determination, self-evaluation, and individual talents. By reflecting on their educational dimension with a focus on their didactic implications I come to conclude that even though didactics does not draw directly on Emerson's educational philosophy, it integrates some aspects, notably the values referred to in this paper.

Keywords

Didactics, *Self-Reliance*, Constructivism, Education, Value.

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I. Introduction

Education has always been at the heart of most, if not all, human endeavours. This explains the growing interest of many scholars in educational issues. Some do it overtly while others allow their readers to induce educational values from their ideas. In this line, some writings of John Dewey, William James and Ralph Waldo Emerson, all leading figures in the field of philosophy, have an educational dimension. *Self-Reliance*, one of Emerson's most impressive and influential works, provides an outstanding contribution to education in general and particularly to the personal development of individuals in society. The relevance of the educational values addressed in *Self-Reliance* makes it an appropriate context for academic reflection. As a researcher and a professional in the field of education, I feel the necessity to scrutinise Emerson's essay in order to have more insight into the educational dimension of the values addressed. In this perspective, I will try to understand Emerson's work in terms of education with a focus on language didactics. My concern is to provide evidence that the educational values expressed instruct didactics. This main preoccupation calls for the following questions: What is meant by didactics? What are the underlying principles of didactics? To what extent do the educational values in *Self-Reliance* instruct didactics? The answers to these questions will derive essentially from developments in the field of didactics and from an analysis of Emerson's essay in light of the underlying principles of didactics. My reflection tackles three main points. I will first address the theoretical framework of this reflection focusing on the theory of constructivism. The constructivist dimension of didactics will then be explained. I will end by discussing the didactic implications of the educational values in Emerson's *Self-Reliance*.

II. The constructivist roots of the study

1. Constructivist theory: relevance for education

Literature defines *constructivism* as a psychological learning theory which evolved from the extensive study of cognitive development. Unlike behaviourism which encourages knowledge transmission to learners, *constructivism* is based on the premise that knowledge is not provided but constructed by learners. This construction, as Piaget

explains, is dependent on the availability of learners' mental structures which allow it. For him, providing information to humans does not guarantee its understanding and use. Knowledge, he argues, needs to be constructed through prior personal experiences. Moreover, Piaget's view that cognitive development is an internal and autonomous process, a product of the mind, suggests an activation of learners' mental processes which allow the construction of knowledge. His idea is not fundamentally distant from Bruner's who posits that knowledge construction is a dynamic process during which learners resorts to former knowledge in order to construct new knowledge. Though Vygotsky's view of constructivism focuses on its social dimension, it does not undermine Piaget's theory which remains a leading idea in the field of human development and learning.

The idea of knowledge construction by learners, advocated by constructivism, corroborates the view that achievement in any aspect of social life requires, from all humans, the ability to resort to their own potentialities. The idea of learning to learn, which relates to constructivism, clearly suggests that effective learning supposes commitment and active involvement on the part of learners. Besides, the passivity of learners encouraged by behaviourist theory might not suit contemporary societies in which all individual members are expected to rely on their own efforts in order to make their way through life.

For a study which aims at discussing the didactic implications of some educational values, the constructivist theory might, in my view, be an ideal framework. These values, in such a framework, will be discussed in light of the extent to which they encourage the individual's central role in the learning process. Moreover, the fact that most educational philosophies in a contemporary society are rooted in constructivist theory partly justifies my choice to carry out this study from this perspective.

2. Constructivism: an instructor for didactics

2.1. Didactics

The term didactics dates back to about 500 B.C. when the Greeks came to the idea that a free Man in society learnt to make choices and behave in society. Plato perceived teaching as something that could be

observed, planned, carried out and evaluated. Later, Aristotle took part in the discussion denouncing the absence of general guidelines for what is to be learnt. The Christian tradition's contribution suggested a focus on learners and the extent to which they relate to content. Traditionally, didactics refers to having the ability to teach, to the taught content, teaching aids, teaching methods, and learning as the main activity of learners. Over time, the meaning of didactics has changed. Today, the term didactics means more than just teaching. It suggests learner-centredness, a reference to the central role of the learner in the learning process and an interest in the mechanisms of appropriation (learning process, mental operations, cognitive operations, cognitive styles, learning styles and strategies). Learners are provided with the means to exercise their responsibility in learning and are put in a situation which allows them to take this responsibility.

It is now clear that the current concern of didactics is to stress the central role of learners in the learning process and the shift from the transmissive dimension of education to the notion of appropriation, which has replaced the mere act of learning. With this shift, the relation between didactics and constructivism clearly stands out though the need to better understand this relation calls for answers to the following questions: How does didactics draw on constructivism? Is the constructivist foundation of didactics an asset for the training of learners?

2.2. The constructivist foundation of didactics

The relation between didactics and constructivism is essentially based on the two notions of construction and appropriation. The didactic triangle, which consists of three sides (learner-teacher or pedagogical relation, teacher-content or curricular relation, learner-content or didactic relation), provides, in my view, an ideal context for an illustration of the extent to which didactics draws on constructivism. The didactic relation involves the learner in constructing knowledge and appropriating it. It is at this stage that the situation created by the teacher causes the activation of learners' mental processes which allow them to construct and organise their knowledge by themselves.

As it can be seen, didactics in its current orientation owes much to constructivism, the latter standing as a catalyst for the former. The dependence is so obvious that one can hardly think of a didactic theory which puts constructivism in the background. Besides, as Hudson (2003) indicates, Klafki's (1998) synthesis of the different positions on didactics results in his critical constructive theory of didactics, which places didactics in a constructive and critical relation to society (self-determination, participation in decision-making and solidarity). One can infer from Klafki's reflection that not only didactics praises knowledge construction and its appropriation, but it also allows the education of individuals as members of the society that they will have the responsibility to construct, transform and improve.

In light of this clearly stated framework, I will now explain Emerson's essay in terms of education with a focus on didactics in general, and particularly on language didactics. In this perspective, I will in turn identify the main values in *Self-Reliance*, discuss their educational dimension in relation to Emerson's philosophy of education, and reflect on their didactic implications.

3. Emerson's *Self-Reliance*: educational dimension

3.1. Values in Emerson's Self-Reliance

Emerson belongs to a period of American literature known as the American Renaissance. Literary works of that period include those by Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman. This group of thinkers, led by Emerson, proposed a definition of what a real US culture should be. The publication by Emerson of *Nature*, an essay written in 1836, was the manifesto of a new movement called *Transcendentalism*. A series of philosophical essays which encouraged an independent spirit were produced about the intellectual, moral, social, religious and political situation of the USA in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s.

In 1841, Emerson wrote *Self-Reliance*, an essay which stands as the beginning of a new era that puts the individual at the centre of life. The individual Emerson refers to departs from the idea of selfishness. The self, in Emerson's conception, entails personal development which, according to him, can produce a harmonious society. He advocates an ideal society consisting of individuals with their specificities and not of

similar people. Emerson praises individuality (developing one's self, one's own culture and education) to the detriment of conformism (learned people, educated people) which he considers to endanger society. Individuals are encouraged to free themselves from too strict habits and conventions, from a traditional and stifling education which involves individuals in receiving information transmitted to them by a knower.

Emerson's *Self-Reliance* advocates ten main values directly related to the concept of individuality: trust, responsibility, self-esteem, self-determination, commitment, independence, creativity, autonomy, self-evaluation and individual talent. Some of them are explicit while others need to be induced.

The expression of the value of trust is best perceived in the following words of Emerson:

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being (11-12).

An individual who trusts himself is more likely to use his potentialities to achieve in any context than one who chooses to trust others. Japan and China are two countries which, some years ago, were referred to as developing countries. They have succeeded in changing their status thanks to their trust in their potentialities. Trust is at the heart of the success of most, if not all, human endeavours. The manifestation of self-reliance is partly dependent on the ability of all individual members of society to trust themselves. Trusting oneself is a social virtue. However, for the improvement of social life, one should not put trusting others in the background. For, as Emerson himself explains, the non conformism that he advocates is not synonymous with rejection.

The values of responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy and independence are more apparent when Emerson asserts:

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till (10).

Self-reliance supposes a manifestation of responsibility. Being a responsible member of society entails rejecting envy and imitation, and making decisions and assuming their consequences. Life is a struggle and all individual members of society must make the right decision by providing energy and effort in order to earn their living. Responsibility is an important factor in every aspect of life. For no development can be achieved in society unless individuals act as responsible citizens who make important decisions for their own good and for the good of their fellow citizens. Commitment suggests personal engagement on the part of the individual, involving him in taking actions in order to achieve. Creativity supposes that an individual uses his potentialities to do things for himself and for society. Autonomy implies the ability to achieve independently of external assistance. All these virtues which appear in the above quotation suggest Emerson's rejection of passive expectance of assistance and his encouragement of an activation of one's own potentialities for one's own good and for the good of society. Self-esteem, self-determination and self-evaluation are important values in *Self-Reliance*. They are perceived in the the following quotations:

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world (15).

I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that should be. I will not hide my tastes or aversions (40).

Self-Reliance entails consideration of oneself as being a person endowed with potentialities, someone who relies on his mind in order to

determine his life in the society where he lives. Self-esteem and self-determination allow an individual to make his way through life without expecting others to decide for what his life should be. This, in turn, calls for his ability to evaluate himself, so that he will improve his ways on the grounds of his revealed limitations.

The expression of individual talent clearly stands out when Emerson writes:

Insist on yourself, never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. [...] Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is unique (51-52).

In a particularly striking way Emerson succeeded in emphasising the necessity for individuals to be aware of the fact that they own a personal talent which only needs to be exploited for their own good and for the good of society. This calls for the question "Why should you expect from the others what you possess?"

All these values denote the kind of behavior expected from individuals in society and thereby suggest their implications in education. Therefore, the question one now needs to answer is as follows: How do the values referred to in *Self-Reliance* relate to education?

4. Emerson's philosophy of education

Prior to 1600, America's education was influenced by the ideas of the Greek philosophers, Plato (c. 427-c 347 B.C.) – the idealist, and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) – the pragmatist. These two scientists encouraged the actualization of individual potentialities in order to achieve happiness. Education aimed at helping the individual to rely on himself. Education, according to Aristotle, is "... an internal process [...] through which potentialities are actualized and happiness is achieved through the individual's activity and effort" (Noll and Kelly, 1970: 16). Even during the period between 1600 and 1800, two figures, Comenius (1592-1670) and Rousseau (1712-1778) based their educational premises on

Aristotle's stands on human potentialities. Rousseau went further so as to sustain that individuals should not be imposed anything. The period between 1800 and 1900 witnessed the advent of the Pestalozzian spirit which is best expressed by Emerson's writings. His idea is that education must begin with the fundamental respect of the noble nature of individuals before reaching the manifestation of individual potentialities. The roots of the philosophical debate in the twentieth century lay in the fundamental discussion between those who believed in the intrinsic values of knowledge and those who advocated the instrumental values of knowledge. The former, with their idealistic approach, encouraged an education based on intellectual development. The latter, with their pragmatic view, encouraged intellectual and social developments with an emphasis on individuals' creative potentialities. These idealistic and pragmatic spirits integrated in the American culture were supported, respectively, on the one hand, by Emerson, Bronson Alcotts and William T. Harris, William James and John Dewey on the other hand.

Emerson's educational philosophy is characterised by the centrality of the individual's mind and its prevailing role in the process of education. The ideas at the heart of his philosophy are that learners' individual needs should be respected and that classes which involve learners in receiving knowledge from their teachers should be discouraged. For Emerson, the existentialist approach, with its focus on rote memorisation and internalisation, uses mechanical methods to feed the mind. An individual, he feels, has an innate ability to think. Therefore, imposing things on him would deny him the ability to resort to his own potentialities in order to achieve. Emerson's attachment to education clearly stands out.

5. How the values in *Self-Reliance* relate to Emerson's philosophy of education

As mentioned earlier, Emerson's essay *Self-Reliance* integrates the following values: trust, responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy, independence, self-esteem, self-determination, self-evaluation and individual talent. All these universally recognised values related to the intrinsic nature of humans call for an appropriate education of all individuals prior to the latter's successful integration in society.

Moreover, the fact that the values referred to directly relate to the centrality of an individual's mind provides strong evidence that they corroborate Emerson's philosophy, which advocates an individualistic approach to education. It is true that this essay does not relate to educational issues in an exclusive way. Equally true is the fact that its content might be instructive in any aspect of life. Nevertheless, the title "Self-Reliance" given to his essay can hardly hide Emerson's view that training all individuals to be self-reliant represents his 'educational creed'. Now that the educational dimension of the values in *Self-Reliance* has been addressed, one relevant question related to my main preoccupation in this study needs to be answered: What are the didactic implications of the educational values expressed in Emerson's *Self-Reliance*?

6. Educational values in Emerson's *Self-Reliance*: didactic implications

6.1. Implications for the pedagogical relation

The pedagogical relation supposes that the teacher creates the conditions for the manifestation of the values mentioned in *Self-Reliance*. The values of trust, responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy, independence, self-esteem, self-determination and individual talent cannot be effective in the classroom unless the pedagogical relation between the teacher and the learners allows their manifestation. The pedagogical relation is where everything begins in terms of education in schools. A poor pedagogical relation is likely to block the activation of the internal energy that can lead learners to take personal initiatives and make use of their own potentialities in order to participate in classroom activities.

6.2. Implications for the curricular relation

Didactics encourages the use in the classroom of content that involves learners' active participation in classroom activities. Active participation calls for the values of trust, responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy, independence, self-evaluation and individual talent. And the responsibility to choose content that integrates these values lies in the teacher's hands. Moreover, the manifestation of self-reliance implies making choices that take into account learners' needs and

expectations, as content that is too distant from their needs and expectations might undermine their active participation in classroom activities and thereby impede the effectiveness of the values referred to.

6.3. Implications for the didactic relation

The constructivist roots of didactics make the didactic relation the central element of the didactic triangle, as the relation between learner and content is more determining for the construction of knowledge by learners and its appropriation. One then understands why the values expressed in *Self-Reliance* present a particular interest for didactics. Knowledge construction supposes a belief in one's own potentialities in any enterprise. Self-trust is prior to the manifestation of the other values which relate to knowledge construction. A learner who does not trust himself might be reluctant to try and overcome the challenges that content exposes him to. The absence of trust might explain the passivity or indifference of some learners during classroom activities.

Knowledge construction implies taking responsible actions in order to achieve. Responsible learners recognize and accept that the responsibility of knowledge appropriation lies in their own hands. One of the teacher's duties is to make learners accept this responsibility. In didactics, 'devolution' is the term used to refer to such an endeavour.

Constructing knowledge requires a certain degree of commitment on the part of learners, which allows them to act on content so that appropriation will occur. Committed learners are more likely to be actively involved in their own training. Commitment represents the energy which leads learners to translate their abstract self-trust into concrete actions that enable knowledge construction.

A constructor is a creator. Learners must demonstrate their creative capacities while constructing knowledge. Vecchi and Carmona-Magnaldi (1996) share this view when they argue that the learner – an actor in the learning process – becomes a creator of knowledge. "No one", they sustain, "can eat in our place; they can cook meals for us, incite us to eat (or oblige us!) to feed ourselves, but it is impossible to swallow and digest for us!" (Vecchi, Carmona-Magnaldi 1996: 5). Being creative entails resorting to one's potentialities in order to make the right use of the available content through adaptations and adjustments. According to

Rogers (1969)¹, humans are endowed with natural potentialities for learning, creative potentiality being one of them.

Knowledge construction is not knowledge transmission. While the latter supposes receiving everything from the teacher (the knower), the former involves autonomous and independent learning. In learning psychology, autonomous learning shares a lot with individualised instruction.

Essentially, autonomy is a *capacity* – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little 1991:4).

The relevance of the psychological relation that Little refers to stands in the psychological argument that learning is better when the learner relies on his potentialities to assume responsibility for his own training. Encouraging autonomy and independence in the classroom increases the chances for learners to pursue their own training outside the classroom.

Self-esteem plays an important role in knowledge construction to the extent that it allows the learner to be himself. Maslow (1968; 1970)² classifies it among psychological needs, whose absence undermines learning. This is so because the absence of self-esteem can cause a certain inferiority complex, the consequence of which is to leave the learner passive and indifferent, passiveness and indifference being among the worse enemies of knowledge construction.

Didactics encourages exposing learners to some obstacles during knowledge construction so that knowledge cannot be constructed unless they have succeeded in overcoming them. Self-determination allows the learner to provide the energy and effort necessary to overcome the existing obstacle during the construction of knowledge. As “obstacle” is one of the notions at the core of developments in didactics, one understands that self-determination is indispensable for the didactic relation.

All construction enterprise requires self-evaluation, which allows the constructor to have an idea of what has been achieved and what is left to be done. The learner who is capable of self-evaluation is more likely to realise that he cannot proceed to the next stage of construction unless the previous one has been achieved. Self-evaluation involves learners in relying on their critical mind for a successful management of the didactic relation.

Construction requires talent. Knowledge construction offers the opportunity to individual learners to resort to their own talents (not the others') in order to move forward in the process of appropriation.

6.4. Implications for foreign language didactics

In light of the above argument, the didactic implications of the values expressed in *Self-Reliance* clearly appear. However, my particular concern with foreign language teaching makes me feel the necessity to reflect on the relevance of these didactic implications for foreign language teaching. In this perspective, I will base my development on the concept of learner-centredness, which is currently in vogue in educational milieus in general and particularly in the context of foreign language teaching.

Traditional methods of language teaching, the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method and the Adiolingual Method among others, which were teacher-led, encouraged the transmission of knowledge by the teacher to learners. Those dogmatic approaches to language teaching did not set the field for learner self-fulfilment. The advent of more modern views of foreign teaching and learning places the learner at the core of the learning process, leading up to the currently praised concept of learner-centredness.

Learner-centredness in the context of language teaching and learning is implemented through such approaches as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Instruction (TBI), Critical Language Awareness (CLA), and Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT). CLT focuses on the communicative function of language. TBI implies learning through tasks which allow for learner motivation, attention, and exposing learners to an appropriate degree of intellectual and linguistic challenge. CLA advocates critical thinking in language learning. CBLT, an application of Competency-Based Education (CBE), focuses on

training foreign language learners to address global issues and solve global problems. All these approaches share the values of trust, responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy, independence, self-esteem, self-determination, self-evaluation, and individual talents expressed in *Self-Reliance*.

Language learning is a process of active development based on the premise that language is a dynamic resource for the creation of meaning. Learners are encouraged to rely on their own potentialities in order to invest themselves in the completion of language learning tasks. Problem-solving tasks, for example, call for the intellectual and reasoning capacities that learners use to solve problems. Those problems, according to Willis (1996: 26-30), involve the expression of hypotheses, discussions, clarifications of values, reflection strategies, the comparison of alternatives, and the evaluation of solutions, which engage learners in overcoming some challenges.

Moreover, the individualised instruction which is encouraged in most educational contexts, including language education, validates Emerson's view that successful education should be dependent on an individual's own potentialities and his personal involvement in his own training. This suggests making choices which allow every individual learner in the language classroom to be self-reliant and eager to devote time and energy to use language for the completion of the tasks he is exposed to. Individuality, a concept praised by Emerson, finds its manifestation in the implementation of individualised instruction in general, and particularly in the context of the language classroom where learners are expected to individually demonstrate their capacity to use language purposefully.

7. Final remarks

My first remark following this reflection is that though the notion of self-reliance is more relevant for the constructivist dimension of didactics, it does not leave the social dimension of learning in the background. Cooperative and collaborative learning currently encouraged in classrooms set the field for individual learners to actualise their potentialities not only for their own good but also for the benefit of their peers. Self-reliance does not stand in contradiction to cooperative

and collaborative learning provided that the teacher makes it possible for learners to rely on their own potentialities while functioning as dynamic members of their class.

The second observation is that, apart from its link with the theory of constructivism, didactics is informed by the ideas of other educational theorists and philosophers. The example of Emerson's *Self-Reliance* provides evidence that understanding their developments in terms of education in general and particularly in terms of didactics might help one have more insight into the theoretical foundations of the didactic practices that are currently in vogue. Moreover, studying the link between didactics and other educational philosophies might enlighten us on the strengths and limitations of current didactic practices, and provide an ideal context for the development of innovative ideas.

The third remark is that although *Self-Reliance* does not send an explicit message to teachers, it seems to talk to them in these terms: 'Your students are endowed with potentialities; just allow their activation and your students will take responsibility for their successful education.' Should teachers appropriate this message, schools would then cease to be places where knowledge is taught to students and become the context for individuals' self-fulfilment and self-development.

The fourth and last remark concerns the enlightenment that this reflection provides in terms of the inter-relatedness of different fields. As long as one admits that Einstein's theory of relativity serves different fields, among which philosophy and education (to name but these two), one cannot but corroborate the view that the inter-relatedness of different fields in scientific research is unavoidably an asset for any scientific endeavour. This paper which has succeeded in setting a bridge between Emerson's *Self-Reliance* and education in schools contributes to strengthening this view.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to discuss the educational dimension of Emerson's *Self-Reliance* with a particular interest in didactics. My concern was to provide evidence that the educational values expressed in Emerson's essay instruct didactics. This main preoccupation called for the following questions: What is meant by didactics? What are the

underlying principles of didactics? How does Emerson's *Self-Reliance* instruct didactics? The study of *Self-Reliance* revealed the expression of some values, the main ones being trust, responsibility, commitment, creativity, autonomy, independence, self-esteem, self-determination, self-evaluation, and individual talents. The reflection on their educational dimension with a focus on their didactic implications enabled me to have more insight in the extent to which the values in the author's essay instruct didactics in general and foreign language didactics in particular. It appears that even though didactics does not draw directly on Emerson's educational philosophy, it integrates some aspects, notably the values referred to in this paper. Despite the relevance of my reflection, I think that Emerson's *Self-Reliance* still sets the field for more acute reflections on the educational merits of this work.

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¹ In M. Williams and Robert L. Burden, 1997, p 35.

² *Ibidem*, p. 33.