

Doomed to Act: Why Postmodern Education May Be Impossible, Not Just (Im)possible

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Gert Biesta has developed a theory of education rooted in postmodern thought. The critical power of various postmodern theorists has been employed in education before. Producing a positive theory of education was also tried, but Biesta's, in my opinion, is the most convincing and original attempt. Frank Margonis is sympathetic to the project, but he is not willing to give up the humanistic tradition. He acknowledges that the postmodern, or posthumanist pedagogy is possible, but it should be used alongside a critical, Freirean one. He does it by casting these pedagogies as forms of address. Different students, he argues, should be addressed differently.

While his is an elegant and practical solution, I am afraid only half of it is going to work. While the multiplicity of the forms of address is plausible, the intersubjective mode cannot be a part of the mix. There are inherent limits for how much postmodernism can be used to build an educational theory. Such a theory should have both a descriptive and a normative side. Without the latter, it is indistinguishable from sociology of education. But postmodern theories are patently unsuitable for developing a normative theory of action. They tell us what is going on, but are not meant to tell us what to do. I realize how incredibly simplistic this proposition may sound, and do my best to make it sound as sophisticated as I possibly can. I also suggest how we should act, after realizing that any coordinated social action is exclusionary.

There are three layers of obstacles to posthumanistic theory of education: the systemic, the pedagogical, and the existential. Margonis begins his essay with an account of how a journalist was able to solicit deep responses from students. But the journalist does not have to collect students' homework, or urge them to behave and to be decent to each other. The journalist is not a part of the power house of cards that is called school, and therefore can afford to be completely nonjudgmental. This is the systemic layer of obstacles. Schooling is a labor arrangement, where students and teachers are involved in a special kind of work, each with special roles in the division of labor. The division of labor cannot exist without supporting power arrangements.

The second layer of limitations is pedagogical. Even if education happens outside of schooling, as long as there is an educator and a student, it persists. An educator always has a second plane of thought. Yes, to the student it may look like he expresses his subjectivity. But the educator has a plan for subjectivity to be expressed; it is an educative moment for her. The moment she welcomes student subjectivity in its fullness, as an equal partner in a dialogue, she ceases to be an educator. It can happen, and may be a welcome change, but it ends an educational relationship. It may seem reprehensible to shape other people's subjectivity, but that

is what we do. As soon as we stop doing it, we are we no more. Educators may no more deny the manipulative side of their trade than a butcher can deny that butchering animal carcasses is a part of his job.

A situation of pure intersubjectivity is perhaps possible. Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others have shown such a possibility. However, all agree it occurs as fleeting moments, and cannot be counted in building institutions involving imbalances of power. Education is about changing other people, whether you label it “helping students to come into presence” or molding them in one’s own image and likeness. Creating opportunities for student subjectivity always and inevitably implies creating certain opportunities, while rejecting other opportunities.

And even when education happens outside of school and without an educator present, there is still the third, existential layer of obstacles for the posthumanist pedagogy. The idea of addressing “complete human beings” is based on a fiction, a humanist invention. We are all partial, limited beings, and every question brings forth a specific kind of answer. Margonis’s central critique of Biesta can be found in this sentence: “the practice of asking students for their perspectives is — by itself — limited, for students often need visions of possibility and intellectual tools to enter social relationships in ways they find affirming.” “It is,” he continues, “often not enough to simply ask students what they think.” He asserts that Freirean pedagogy does that — offer students a political context in which an answer is possible to the fundamental questions of Biesta: “What do you think about it?,” “Where do you stand?,” and “How do you respond?” There is no intersubjective space not contaminated by political backgrounds.

How do you know where you stand anyway? The knowledge of ourselves is a particular kind of epistemology, but it is an epistemology nevertheless. We learn what we want from actions we take. We first commit ourselves to something and then rationalize our choices with mental devices like desire and preference. We invent or discover our subjectivity through our choices. Yes, it is unfortunate that people around us impose their specific versions of what is it to be human on us. We can comply with such a version or rebel against it, but I do not see how coming into being can be accomplished against the essentializing background of one kind or another.

The intersubjective and posthumanist pedagogy is a practical impossibility, because educators are doomed to act, and the object of their actions is other people’s lives. Without educators, students are doomed to act, too, making choices and inventing their subjectivity.

How should we act then? For one, we must admit that modernist approaches to education can be more or less effective in respecting the diverse human dignity. They will not ever be free of a specific conception of being human, but so what? The implied requirement that an educator must never limit student development in any way is excessive, and will paralyze educators into inaction. School is a social organization, which relies on norms, rules, and limitation for its very existence. It could be built with any kind of philosophical approach, except for postmodernism.

We also must not forget that humanism, even broadly understood to include all the shades from rationalism to Marxism is not the only game in town. It arose in reaction against a religious worldview that is decidedly not centered on human beings, and therefore does not depend on a particular way of understanding what it is to be human. God is not the same as an idealized human being. And although there have been plenty attempts to define God in a particular kind of way, we must not ignore the remarkable ability of religious thought to embrace the diversity of human beings; the diversity of sinful imperfection modeled after an unknowable ideal. This capacity is closely linked to the degree of agnosticism regarding God, which varies greatly among religious traditions.

And I wholeheartedly agree with Margonis that eclectic, loose systems with multiple forms of address seems to be a much better choice than a single-minded and therefore totalitarizing ideology, be it Freirean neo-Marxism, or religion, or the managerial accountability. The art of mixing the existing and limited forms of address seems to be much more promising than the art of replacing them all with one intersubjective mode of address, supposedly free of their faults.

In general, finding faults in a theory is not a sufficient reason to abandon it. We all know the shortcoming of fossil fuels or nuclear energy. But knowing the problems does not lead us immediately to abandoning either. It is the same with humanist approaches — yes, they all have a problem of limiting humanity to a specific model, which excludes whole groups of people. But there are shades and degrees of exclusion. In the United States, for example, exclusion from educational opportunities has little to do with the use of humanist discourses in education. Our students fail not because Freirean dialogues have a totalitarian streak to them. They do so because of the patterns of residential segregation, school funding, and structural racism. A chaotic and oppressive school will damage its students' subjectivity to a much greater extent than a well-run, orderly but essentializing school of any kind. Even the managerial accountability movement has produced many good schools, where their leaders are not radicals.

Biesta wants to prevent the limiting effect of the idea of a rational individual. But life itself has ways of limiting dominating discourses. Those who defend the Enlightenment sometimes point out that its ideals were never actually realized. Some want the project to continue, and others insist it is a harmful project that must be abandoned. No one seems to question if these projects have any chance for complete victory. And if not, why should we worry too much about it one way or another?