

## Education: filling the mind or opening the existence? A phenomenological perspective

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### Abstract

Understanding the Relationship between existence and education is one of the most fascinating and challenging issue of phenomenology. In this contribute, we explored this topic, discussing a number of pedagogical metaphors, which define education as shaping, forming, molding. In contrast with this tradition, we argue that education is a process by which a human being opens another human being to his own possibilities, opening up the horizon of the possible, and opening the subject to the understanding of the world, himself and others, by putting him in the position to exercise his freedom, *to choose which are the possibilities for him and determine who he wants to be.*

**Keywords:** phenomenology, intentionality, education, longlife learning, mind.

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### The subject: from mind to existence

A number of metaphors define the scope of what has historically been called pedagogical knowledge. The first is the notion of mind. This has neither a determined conceptual status nor any intuitive grounds, since we do not know where to place it. Mind is not the brain, but is located “inside”, even though it is not at all clear what this “inside” may mean. It is just a metaphor, which nevertheless shapes how we think the educational process: the mind is a place “where” there are contents, it is a kind of file, a box or cabinet filled with contents and that we have to fill with good information.

This metaphor can then assume a behavioural or cognitive perspective: it can be understood as a set of learned habits, a series of meaning schemes or a process of inputs, managed in short term memory and coded for long-term recall, yet at

any rate it implies a series of pedagogical consequences. If mind is a file filled with contents, then learning means to acquire contents. These must be stored in the mind and be available to the subject in the activities of life. Therefore, *knowing is viewed as the ability to remember and recall the acquired contents*. Sometimes the file is not well organised, so it requires transformative learning, a change in the organisation of the drawers in which the contents are stored.

This could roughly be the conceptual stance out of which the phenomenological approach intends to step. If asked what it means to learn, indeed, we may answer in two ways:

a) learning means transforming your own mind, i.e. your own ideas, beliefs, opinions and ways of feeling, which are inside the inner sphere;

b) learning means transforming one's own being in the world, i.e. meeting new possibilities, which displace and transform us, opening the existence towards new directions.

While the first is a non-intentional understanding of the consciousness, the second is intentional. The basic thesis of the phenomenological tradition is that the relationship between consciousness and the world is an intentional one. This means that objects which the subject refers to are not within the mind: rather, the mind is directed (opened) towards them. Therefore, the meaning of any matter, proposition or encounter is *not* relative to the perspective or frame of reference in terms of which it is construed. When someone contends that “meanings exist within ourselves” or in some frame of mind or reference, we must - from a phenomenological point of view - reply that meanings are in the world.

Let me explain this point through the example of mathematics. Mathematical entities are not in my head, but they are what I aim for, and their validity depends neither on how my mind is biologically made up nor how culture shapes it. The fundamental difference here is therefore between “to have within the mind” and “to have in mind”. The things of the world are not within my mind, but they are what I have in mind, what I refer to. So, if we want to maintain this overcompromised metaphor of the “mind”, we have to say that it is to be meant in another way: the “mind” is simply a reference mode, a way of referring to the world, and the world shapes our mind only insofar as it transforms our existence, opening it towards other directions: education therefore aims to make it possible to pass from our experienced world to the world of mathematics or arts.

Culture can of course make reference to the world of mathematical relations possible, and we know that neither all cultures nor small children have access to the mathematical world, and we could figure out that nobody in the world could be able to think in a mathematical way. But in spite of this, the laws of mathematics would be the same and they would not depend on how the mind is shaped. This implies that learning mathematics does not consist in introducing contents to the mind, but rather in directing the mind towards *the relations which make up the*

*world of mathematics*. The purpose of teaching mathematics is to introduce the learner to the structural totality and system of differences which constitutes the mathematical world as a systematically structured totality, and as a system of references of something to something. This ability to refer something to another thing is what we might perhaps call to *develop a skill*, which is what remains after forgetting the contents you have learned at school. Indeed, new knowledge and new skills can be acquired only in so far as there is a change in our being in the world. The purpose of education is not mastering skill sets through drills, but rather involves a transformation of the being in the world, and this happens when a new possibility of action has been understood.

Indeed, something means something else to me simply because it hints at other things. Understanding is not “to bestow a sense” or to construct meanings, but to explicate (*auslegen*) the links that are already *implicitly given* between things. Thus, learning is not the acquisition of contents and discrete blocks, which are added to one another, but the understanding of synthetic structures and systems of cross-references. So, I understand what a pen is because I understand what a notebook, writing and students are. The meaning of the pen is neither in the object (a crude realism) nor in the mind (exasperated constructivism), but within this system of differences and references.

These are independent of the mind, they do not depend on its meaning schemes or on our meaning-making, since they have their own way of creating references, and then their own rules, their own autonomy from our mind, whereby they can oppose and resist both our subjective and cultural ways of meaning-making and our beliefs.

The link between a hammer and a nail is a direction of fit, and the meaning of a knife is to cut the bread, whereby a knife that doesn't cut ceases to be a knife (Patočka, 1976, p. 112). Its meaning is merely its function. These references are links of adaptation, so one thing leads to another depending on a rule that is immanent to the contents and cannot be interpreted differently *within the system of references* which is, therefore, an ontological and not a psychological or cultural structure. Therefore, if “constructivism's basic claim is simply that knowledge is “right” or “wrong” in light of the perspective we have chosen to assume” (Bruner, 1990, p. 25), the basic claim of phenomenology is that *within a world not every perspective can work*, because it has to fit with the structural system of references, because things *as meanings* are attuned between them.

A number 18 spanner is used to tighten a number 18 bolt, and with it you cannot tighten a number 20 bolt, even Richard Rorty would fail. In this sense, whereas a constructivist approach argues that the nature of an object or event consists of the meaning that the individual bestows on it, from a phenomenological perspective the nature and meaning of an object is determined by the system of references in which it is embedded. The meaning lies neither in the object nor in the

subject: it is given by the relations the object has with other objects. To learn therefore means to grasp these references.

So  $2 + 2 = 4$ . There may be a mind that is not able to refer to the world of mathematical relationships, but if it is open to it, then the mind has only to follow the laws which belong to that ontological field, which are immanent to it.

For this reason, a phenomenological perspective contends that meanings are in the world, that the subject is a being in the world and that learning does not mean expanding the knowledge of the contents, but rather *developing the ability to grasp relationships*, because it is in this way students can come to terms with their lives. Whereby it is not essential that students survey the entire range of sciences and that they know every algebraic formula. It is essential that, through some manageable set of examples, they develop the ability to draw on these examples and grasp the laws that are immanent to it. In this sense, an individual understands a concept, theory or domain of knowledge insofar as he can grasp the relationships which are constitutive of a certain world.

Of course, human beings have to understand the meaning of their experience, but understanding does not mean “meaning-making”. It means becoming able to disclose *the possibilities of action given in the world*. Learning as transformation of the self thus involves the ability to grasp their own possibilities, which are in the world, and in this sense it matches a critical approach to pedagogy insofar as grasping their own possibilities of action plays a pivotal role in helping students to unmask the ways in which forms of power and domination operate to shape their interaction with the world they inhabit.

The world is an implicit context of sense articulated by pre-delineations, which means that “the peculiar thing is that meaning points into contexts; phenomenologically, it is found how in them themselves motives are posited in such a way that these give a direction of the sense-complex” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 25). Hence, to understand means to explicate these pre-delineations, bring out what it is implicit in them, link one thing to another. Then, if to be a subject is to be in the mode of being aware of oneself, this awareness is always being conscious of the possibilities that you are offered by the world. Intentionality is a way of referring to the world, and this is not a mess, but a coherent horizon, a synthetic coherence running through all our acts. As Husserl put it, things, objects are “given” as being valid for us “in such a way that we are conscious of them as things or objects *with-in the world-horizon*. Each one is something, “something of” the world of which we are constantly conscious as a horizon” (Husserl, 1970, p. 143).

Learning thus means grasping the references and the synthetic coherence of such a structure as the world of mathematics, the world of history or the world of politics. If the subject has developed an ontological core competency and is able to understand the rules of such an ontological field, he can understand every single aspect even without respecting the order of the handbook and he can also make

genuine use of that virtual memory that is the web and can appropriately apply its own knowledge in different situations.

By emphasising that meanings (possibilities of action) are involved in the world, we have sought to point out that learning does not mean overloading the memory or developing that peculiar memory that belongs to the time of the book (and the handbook). Learning entails developing a competency as a way of inhabiting the world – to stay within our example – of mathematics.

### **Existential disclosure and lifelong learning**

All this implies of course an understanding of the anthropological meaning of intentionality. If the human being is a being in the world, his existence entails a triple opening:

- A) we understand the world as the horizon of our own possibilities of action,
- B) we understand the other, with whom we share this horizon of meanings,
- C) we understand ourselves as temporal beings, directed towards the future, and understanding the future requires that we define who we want to be.

These three openings offer hints as to what we can mean by education. Education is the process of opening the subject to these three dimensions. Education must make the person able to reorganise the horizon of references of meaning in which he lives, and to do it every time new possibilities for action come into his field of experience, because otherwise the movement of existence is halted. The goal of education is not to transfer a stock of ideas from the mind of the educator to the mind of the student. We have to think about the subject not as a closed box with contents, but rather as an opening to the world.

This does not originally imply metacognition, since the way a subject refers to himself changes to the extent that new possibilities for action appear in his experience and alter his world and the horizon of references of meaning. Therefore, reflective self-consciousness is rooted in the movement of the existence, and it is simply a consequence of what prereflectively occurs to our being in the world. The idea of consciousness as a box of contents can mislead us into supposing that access to our existence must simply be the perceiving reflection and critical attitude towards ourselves.

From a phenomenological point of view, we must reject this claim, since in the reflective attitude existence judges itself by accepting some intersubjective criteria. Therefore, self-reflection applies these criteria and levels off all possibilities of being. Transformative learning does not therefore indicate an exceptional state of the person and does not require a state detached from the original being in the world, but must rather be understood as an existential modification of the movement of the existence, i.e. *as a disclosure of other possibilities of being*, which do not reveal them-

selves by looking away from them, but rather by the modification of our being in the world. The subject has to find himself in his surrounding world and not by withdrawing into himself. As Heidegger pointed out to, we have to ask ourselves whether it is “*a priori* self-evident that the access to *Da-sein* must be simple perceiving reflection of the I or acts” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 109).

Also critical reflection is grounded into our being in the world and it occurs within a certain attunement and understanding, and this changes when something occurs in our being in the world. Self-development and disclosure of a world are intentional correlative events, i.e. diffraction of a unitary structure, two moments of one intentional correlation: the movement of the existence opens up to a world of possibilities and produces a subject related to it, since the appearance of possibilities displaces the subject and alters his position in the world.

Teaching does not therefore have to change the perspective, but leads to the encounter of new possibilities in the world, i.e. new directions which can be pursued by existence. According to this idea, learning doesn't primarily mean changing our understanding of ourselves or the reflective revision of our belief system, but rather perceiving what in the world has come to light.

At the same time, these claims should not be misunderstood. We are not advocating that learning does not have to do with transforming our own understanding of ourselves or our belief system. Rather, we are drawing attention to the primacy of a transformation in the movement of existence, which takes place when a new possibility hints to a different direction of life.

When a new possibility of existence appears, our being in the world is affected and, consequently, our understanding of ourselves is altered. Therefore, teaching is not facilitating the transformation of basic worldview by implementing critical reflection on their experience, which in turn would lead to a transformation of our worldview. How could we be able to reflect critically on our experience if we didn't already have a different existential direction of life? Teaching is therefore letting the person “see” the new possibilities. Education does not have to do with implementing self-reflection, but with enlarging *circumspection* (*Umsicht*) as a way of being in the world and taking care of things, himself and others. Learning is making experience of the world and not finding new ways of *defining* the world, it is discovering meaning and not meaning-making.

There is a pre-reflective self-consciousness which constitutes a necessary condition for being conscious of something, and it precedes every self-reflection, which occurs within the horizon pre-delineated by our pre-reflective self-consciousness, and makes it possible. The expansion of our world and the disclosure of references between possibilities given in the world precedes the transformation of our consciousness and our reflective awareness and makes it possible.

But the disclosure of the world also depends on the relation to other subjects, since others are constitutive of subjectivity. As Heidegger argues, “a mere subject



without a world “is” not initially and is also never given. And, thus, an isolated I without the others is in the end just as far from being given initially” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 109). Being a subject means being able to remain oneself, different from others, albeit *through* others. Being in the world means to be through others, with others but keeping his own difference from others. To be able to stay and live in this difference is the challenge of existence, which can take a defective pattern, for example when the subject comes to depend on the other's gaze or, conversely, when the subject is unable to decentralise himself and take the point of view of others. In both cases, the development of a relational and, at the same time, autonomous subject is not possible.

The appearance of possibilities of action also opens up the relationship with the future, because the meanings given in a world are potentiality of being. In the world, as far as the subject has to act, he finds out what he can be. Therefore, education that does not open to the meanings and possibilities given within a world cancels the horizons of expectation, and instead of education it produces closedness, as maybe occurs at school.

Of course, although we have spoken of three dimensions, it is clear that these are simply three aspects of a unitary movement of the existence, and that a change in one dimension of the three involves changes of the being in the world as a whole. Although it cannot be developed on herein, it goes without saying that in genuine education the educator should clearly know a) in which horizon of meanings the learner lives, b) in which network of interaction he is enveloped, as the actions of others affect what one plans to do, and c) what kind of relationship with the future and the past he entertains.

If the teacher or the educator in general does not understand this, no educational relationship with the learner is possible, and the education provided is useless and unrelated to that existence: what the education provides cannot be received by that existence. This cannot be put into motion because a genuine possibility of action is not offered. Education offers only frames of meanings which he cannot find in the world. In some structured sense-complexes it is nonsense to teach something which cannot have any relevance in such a world. Sometimes a good teacher of literature is unable to decentralise himself and remains so self-centred that he cannot understand that some information in certain contexts is meaningless. Bruner noted that “education does not stand alone, and it cannot be designed as if it did. It exists in a culture. And culture, whatever else it is, is also about power, distinctions, and rewards” (Bruner, 1996, p. 28). However, this correct indication is perhaps too vague, and the threefold articulation of intentionality referred to above should allow us to indicate what education should be in order to have transformative value.

This goes not only for the child, whose education consists in letting him enter this network of references between meanings, enabling him to understand the

possibilities that a certain world offers him. It also applies to the adult, who must continually re-open himself to the horizon of references that constitutes his world, and have to understand again and again the possibilities evolving within the horizon of meanings that he inhabits.

This is precisely a way of understanding the lifelong learning that is quite different from other approaches. Indeed, lifelong learning can become a disciplinary apparatus through which the subject is dispossessed of his own subjectivity. Lifelong learning can become a total hold, or can tend “to be an exhaustive capture of the individual’s Body, action, time, and behaviour” (Foucault, 2006, p. 46). It can be a seizure of the body, of the time in its totality, and not just of the time of service.

Taking care of your own existence refers here to a process of constantly adapting to the needs of the market, and the definition of yourself consists here in being able to adapt and become “attractive” in a flexible world. If this occurs there is a complete reversal of the three dimensions of intentionality we have pointed out. Indeed, through lifelong learning the subject can experience a seizure of his own possibilities of existence, because the category of possibility is replaced by the ability to adapt to market circumstances, since corporate organisations are increasingly turning towards flexibility and decentralisation. Then, there is a seizure of his time, because there is not just a certain amount of time deducted from people’s lives, there is rather a seizure of the individual’s time and future. Finally, there is a change in the way others are encountered, since others become a gaze which continually observes the subject. This is therefore perpetually under someone’s gaze. As Foucault put it, “disciplinary power is not discontinuous but involves a procedure of continuous control instead. In the disciplinary system, one is not available for someone’s possible use, one is perpetually under someone’s gaze, or, at any rate, in the situation of being observed” (Foucault, 2006, p. 47).

For example, in an attempt to launch the *European Year of Lifelong Learning*, the *European Union’s White Paper Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* (1996) asserted that “the ultimate goal of training, to build up individual’s self-reliance and occupational capacity, makes it the linchpin of adaptation and change”. If prosperity depends upon equipping learners with the skill the modern economy needs, then the purpose of education is to serve the economy (Standish, 2003, p. 221). This is of course a way by which reality is not denoted, but rather connoted, i.e. made up, constituted. Pretending to be obvious and non-ideological, this discourse is a way through which lifelong learning comes to be persuasive and powerful: the complete fulfilment of a man requires that he be able to adapt and accept the stringent constraints of an empirical system. The basic idea which supports the discourse is that the ability to adapt is needed for economies to survive in globally competitive markets.



*The world as the totality of possibilities of action become a system of constraints.* The focus on the economic function of lifelong learning within contemporary discourses therefore needs to be analysed as produced within specific and discursive conditions (Nicoll and Fejes, 2008). In the predominantly utilitarian climate there is a shift in the way we conceive and practice education, and this climate influences the way in which we can approach the question of lifelong learning. Within this climate it is forgotten that, in the last 20 years, investments in formal education have not led to economic growth. On the contrary, we have experienced a generation of unprecedented growth of advanced formal education and flexibility along with economic stagnation and high unemployment, and as a consequence there is the greatest surplus of underutilised skills (Livingstone and Guile, 2012).

Lifelong learning can therefore become a defective way of taking care of one's own existence. Lifelong learning can indeed become a daily, quiet, inconspicuous expropriation of one's time, and this is conceptualised as the capacity to adapt quickly to changes in the nature of work and take responsibility for self-managing (Hager and Holland, 2006).

The subject is expropriated of his own opportunities, since the only opportunities left to him become those provided by the needs of corporations. As a consequence, the time of the subject is captured, as it has to be used to acquire the skills needed by the economy. You simply have to acquire them if you do not want to be excluded from economic life. *Like any mechanism of inclusion, this is also a mechanism of exclusion*, since it includes only because it defines the exclusion criteria.

## Education

On this basis, we may ask: under what conditions would we be willing to talk about education? And in this direction we must primarily distance ourselves from a certain frame (or perhaps better, yet again, a set of metaphors): shaping, pruning, building. These metaphors underlie the modern concept of education, and if we had time we could show their historical genealogy, that is, as they are rooted in a preconception that has a beginning and an end, one that structures the educational relationship according to an artificial model: a student has to learn from a teacher, but he does not recognise him as teacher and the teacher does not feel recognised himself, whereby the interaction becomes a struggle for recognition.

This artificial relationship brings out some leading metaphors of the pedagogical thought. At various points of his work, Wolfgang Brezinka defines education as “those actions through which humans beings attempt to produce lasting improvements in the structure of psychic dispositions of other people, to retain components they consider positive or to prevent the formation of dispositions they regard as negative” (Brezinka, 1992, p. 40-41). The definition we find in

Dewey does not differ from this conception. According to Dewey “we speak of education as shaping, forming, molding activity - that is, a shaping into the standard form of social activity” (Dewey, 2009, p. 9). Recently, Howard Gardner also wrote that “education has to do with fashioning certain kinds of individuals - the kinds of persons I (and others) desire the young of the world to become. I crave human beings who understand the world, who gain sustenance from such understanding, and who want - ardently, perennially - to alter it for the better. Such citizens can only come into existence if students learn to understand the world as it has been portrayed by those who have studied it most carefully and lived in it most thoughtfully” (Gardner, 2000, p. 19-20). And here, of course, the question arises: what does understanding the world mean?

Here, the ontological assumption is that education consists in shaping, forging, altering. In this way you conceal another chance to think about the educational relationship, one that stems from the question: how can the teacher facilitate learning processes without cancelling the diversity of the learner’s perspective? (Stojanov, 2006) It seems here that the alternative would be between development from within and formation from without, imposition from above and from outside and free activity (Dewey, 1997).

That way of thinking about education implies the removal of a constitutive feature of the educational relationship: the difference between teacher and learner. Since education is a relationship to otherness, the reduction of the otherness of the learner to the subjectivity of the teacher must be avoided. The phenomenological tradition offers a different and opposite metaphor: that of opening, of disclosedness. To educate is to let them see their own possibilities. Education does not mean shaping and altering, but rather placing the learner in front of his own possibilities, letting him understand the system of references of his own world.

In the educational process the changing of the subject is not at stake. Education must instead place him in front of his possibilities. It is a question of enabling him to inhabit his own world, without determining *how this is to be inhabited*. The difference between education and training lies precisely in this: education opens to a horizon of possibilities, whereas training determines how the possibilities have to be used, transforming possibilities into constraints.

In training the implicit assumption is: this is the course of the world, these are the constraints of the world and education is the process by which bodies are bent and shaped to serve the course of the world. In this setting, the educational relationship assumes a defective attitude, as the educational relationship is featured as a relationship between a subject (the teacher) and an object (the student). The teacher faces the student not with a personalistic but a naturalistic attitude (Husserl, 1989, p. 183), regarding the learner as an object. The subject is not brought back to himself, i.e. to his own possibilities, but is “subjected to”, i.e. constituted as a subject only in his being a function “of”.

So we may try to propose a phenomenological definition of education: education is a process by which a human being opens another human being to his own possibilities, opening up the horizon of the possible, and opening the subject to the understanding of the world, himself and others, by putting him in the position to exercise his freedom, *to choose which are the possibilities for him and determine who he wants to be*.

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