



Is There a Need for the Re(dis)covery of Teaching?

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GERT BIESTA

Brunel University London

University of Humanistic Studies, the Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year I published a book with the title *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (Biesta, 2017). In the book, I make the case that teaching matters. But unlike a significant part of contemporary discourse, I argue against the idea that the reason why teaching matters is that it has the capacity for driving test scores in the narrow set of curricular subjects that the Global Education Measurement Industry is keen to measure, not just to identify 'quality,' but also to 'name and shame' countries that are apparently not performing 'well'—a naming and shaming where, unfortunately, teachers often find themselves at the receiving end.

The argument I develop in the book is a very different one, namely that teaching matters for the democratic, political and emancipatory aspirations of education, where the ambition is to help and encourage children and young people to exist in the world in a democratic and sustainable way. This argument is particularly important, in my view, because in recent decades teaching has too often been given a bad name in relation to such aspirations, which is evidenced, so I suggest in the book, in the 'turn' towards learning, on the assumption that the freedom to learn, to interpret and make sense, is what progressive education should seek to achieve.

One line in the book is that this freedom to learn and make sense needs critical scrutiny, as it may end up just being another instance of the neo-liberal freedom to 'do what you want to do,' without being concerned about the consequences of one's choices and actions. The other line in the book is to think differently about freedom, linking it to the ways in which we respond to the social and natural world around us. Here, so I suggest, an altogether different meaning and significance of teaching comes into view—and it is this significance that I seek to recover and rediscover. The text that follows is taken from the introduction to the book, in order to give an indication of the kind of discussions that I believe are important to engage in if we seek to keep teaching firmly connected to education as a democratic and progressive project, and not as a machine for the effective production of 'learning outcomes.'

TEACHING MATTERS?

The point I seek to make in this book is that teaching matters. In itself this may not be a very contentious claim, and in certain circles it has actually become quite popular to argue that the teacher is the most important ‘factor’ in the educational process (see, e.g., Department for Education, 2010; Donaldson, 2010; McKinsey & Co., 2007; OECD 2005) albeit that we should be wary of referring to the teacher as a mere factor, as it runs the risk of ‘forgetting’ that the teacher is a thinking and feeling human being and, more importantly, a thoughtful professional. The real issue, however, is not whether teaching matters; the real issue is how teaching matters and what teaching matters for. It is in relation to these questions that the discussion already becomes a bit more complicated, because in recent years the role and position of teaching and the teacher has been challenged from two different, but in sense complementary, angles.

One development concerns the impact of the rise of the language and the ‘logic’ of learning on education; a development that has shifted the attention away from teaching and the teacher towards students and their learning (see Biesta, 2006; 2010). The rise of the language and logic of learning has transformed the teacher from a ‘sage on the stage’ to that of a ‘guide on the side’ – a facilitator of learning, as the expression goes – and even, according to some, to that of a ‘peer at the rear.’ While the idea of the teacher as a fellow learner or of the classroom as a community of learners may sound attractive and progressive, such learning-centred depictions of education tend to provide rather unhelpful and in my view, ultimately misleading accounts of what teaching is, what the work of the teacher is, and what students might gain from encounters with teaching and teachers. The ideas put forward in this book are therefore an attempt at the recovery of teaching in an age of learning, and at the rediscovery of the significance and importance of teaching and the teacher.

TEACHING AS CONTROL

Yet making a case for the importance of teaching and the teacher is not entirely without problems. A major difficulty stems from the fact that in recent years the suggestion that teaching matters has been made most vociferously from the more conservative end of the spectrum, where teaching is basically approached in terms of *control* and where the control of the work of the teacher itself has also emerged as a major issue (see Kneyber & Evers, 2015; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson 2015). One version of this argument is the idea that the best and most effective teachers are those who are able to steer the educational process towards the secure production of a small set of pre-defined ‘learning outcomes’ and a limited number of pre-specified identities, such as that of the good citizen or the flexible lifelong learner.

There is not only an ongoing research effort focused on generating evidence about what apparently ‘works’ in relation to this ambition (see Biesta, 2007; Smeyers & DePaepe, 2006). There is also a ‘global education measurement industry’ (Biesta, 2015) eager to indicate which systems perform best in producing the desired outcomes. The call for education as control and for teachers as agents of control is also voiced through concerns about an apparent loss of authority in contemporary society and the suggestion that

education is the key instrument for restoring such authority, including the authority of the teacher itself (see, for example, Meirieu, 2007). What is often (conveniently) forgotten in such discussions is that authority is fundamentally a *relational* matter (see Bingham, 2009) and not something that one person can simply impose onto another person.

THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM

The main problem with the idea of teaching as control, with the depiction of teaching as an act of control and with the suggestion that teaching ought to be a matter of control, is that in such configurations students can only appear as *objects* of the teacher's intentions and actions, but not as *subjects* in their own right. This has been the main bone of contention in all the criticisms of authoritarian forms of education, culminating in calls for the abolishment of the very 'project' of education altogether, such as in the case of the anti-education movement (*Antipädagogik*) which emerged in Germany in the late 1960s (see Von Braunmühl, 1975).

What is interesting, and in a sense, remarkable, is that the teacher has been a recurring target of this critique. The assumption here seems to be that teaching can ultimately only be understood as something that *limits* the freedom of students and thus hinders the possibility for them to exist as subjects in their own right. This is a major reason why attempts at (literally) dethroning and sidelining the teacher ('from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side') and at refocusing education on students, their learning, their sense-making, and their active construction of knowledge – to name some of the main trends in contemporary educational thought and practice – are generally seen as liberating and progressive moves.

In such a context and climate, it seems that any attempt at making a case for the importance of teaching and the teacher can only be perceived as a step backwards, as a conservative rather than a progressive contribution to the discussion. It is important to see, however, that this only follows if we conceive of what it means to exist as subject in terms of what Hannah Arendt (1977) has aptly characterised as the idea of *freedom as sovereignty* where to be free, to exist as free subject, means *not* to be influenced by anything or anyone outside of oneself.

The question, however, is whether this is a viable conception of what it means to exist as subject. One major line in the chapters in the book seek to argue is that this is *not* the case, and that to exist as subject actually means to be in an ongoing 'state of dialogue' with what and who is other; a 'state of dialogue,' moreover, where our subject-ness is not constituted from the inside-out, that is, from our intentions and desires, but is intimately bound up with the ways in which we engage with and respond to what and who is other, with what and who speaks to us, addresses us, calls us and thus calls us forth.

EXISTING AS SUBJECT

When we begin to think about our existence as subject along these lines, teaching starts to gain a new significance, first and foremost because as an 'address' that comes to us from the outside – we might also say: an address that transcends us (see Biesta, 2013) – it is no longer automatically limiting or

even obstructing the possibility for us to exist as subject, but may well be the very 'event' that opens up possibilities for us to exist *as subject*. This is indeed the other major line in the chapters in the book, where I explore teaching in its significance for subject-ness, its significance for our existing *as subjects*. Here, I suggest, teaching becomes concerned with opening up existential possibilities for students, that is, possibilities in and through which students can explore what it might mean to exist as subject in and with the world. Along these lines teaching begins to appear as the very *opposite* of control, the very opposite of attempts at approaching students merely as objects, but rather takes the form of approaching students as subjects even, as I argue, when there is no evidence that they are capable of it.

THE NEED FOR A RECOVERY OF TEACHING

There are three reasons why I believe that the ideas explored in this book may matter. The first has to do with the fact that in the domain of education, teaching has generally become positioned at the conservative end of the spectrum, while most of what opposes teaching – such as the focus on student learning, on their meaning making and knowledge construction, on their creativity and expression – is seen as liberating and progressive and as supporting and enhancing subject-ness. We find this represented, for example, in the ongoing 'swing' from curriculum-centred to child-centred and student-centred conceptions of education. What is remarkably absent in the discussion is the consideration of a *third option*, one where teaching is positioned at the progressive end of the spectrum and is (re)connected with the emancipatory ambitions of education. What I offer in the book is such a third option—a set of progressive arguments for what is nowadays generally seen as a conservative idea. My ambition is not only to rediscover the progressive significance of teaching, but also to show that a focus on student learning, on sense-making, construction, creativity and expression – ideas that are often presented as ways to counter education as control – may in themselves have little to do with enhancing the possibilities for students to exist as subject.

EDUCATION IN THE 'IMPULSE SOCIETY'

To exist as subject, as I suggest, means being in a 'state of dialogue' with what and who is other; it means being exposed to what and who is other, being addressed by what and who is other, being taught by what and who is other, and pondering what this means for our own existence and for the desires we have about our existence. To exist as subject therefore means that we engage with the question whether what we desire is desirable, not only for our own lives, but also for the lives we try to live with others on a planet that has limited capacity for fulfilling all the desires projected onto it. Such a way of understanding what it means to exist as subject stands in some tension to what many see as a major tenet of our times, where our freedom as human subject is predominantly understood as the freedom of *choice*: the freedom to choose what we want to choose, to do what we want to do, to have what we want to have, to be what we want to be, and also buy what we want to buy. The approach towards human subject-ness that is pursued in the book therefore also raises some wider questions about this major trend in contemporary

society—a society that Paul Roberts (2014) has characterised, very accurately in my view, as an ‘impulse society’

THE HUMAN BEING: AN ANIMAL WHO CAN LEARN OR A BEING WHO CAN BE TAUGHT

A third reason why the ideas put forward in the book may be of importance is in relation to more philosophical discussions about human *being* and human beings. Whereas my ambitions with the book are not philosophical but educational, it may nonetheless be interesting to ponder one main philosophical implication from the arguments I present, in which I seek to suggest that our human subject-ness may not be located in our capacity to learn, to make sense, to give meaning, and so forth, but is first and most to be found in our ‘ability’ to be addressed, to be spoken to, to be taught. This suggests, in its shortest formula, that the human being is not an animal who can learn, but rather a being who can be taught and can receive (a) teaching.

CONCLUSION

In the book, I explore these issues in five chapters that focus on the question of existing as subject, the question what learning actually has to do in education, the question whether our ability to make meaning is indeed fundamental or whether meaning making is secondary to the ways we are being spoken to by what and who is other; the question of the teacher in emancipatory education; and the difference between discourses about growth and development and what education is about. I conclude this with a plea for giving teaching back to education (which needs to be read carefully and should be distinguished from the attempt to give education back to teachers—which is important too, but only after we have restored a proper place for teaching itself).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GERT BIESTA

Brunel University London

University of Humanistic Studies, the Netherlands



Gert Biesta is Professor of Education in the Department of Education of Brunel University London, Visiting Professor at NLA University College, Bergen, Norway and Professor for Education at the University for Humanistic Studies, the Netherlands. An associate member of the Education Council of the Netherlands, his work focuses on the theory and philosophy of education, educational, and social research, with a particular interest in policy and questions concerning democracy and democratisation.

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