A BEACON GUIDING ME.

HOW ONTOLOGICAL VISIONS RENDER THE TEACHING MISSION CONSISTENCY

Lotta Jons, PhD, Educational Developer
Centre for Learning and Teaching, Stockholm University
lotta.jons@upc.su.se

This paper deals with the question of “Why Philosophy of Education?”. By focusing on the guidelines used by teachers in going about their teaching mission, it argues for the consistency gained by “doing philosophy”, compared to following ready-made ethical theories or moral rules of conduct. This choice is elaborated as a choice between taking guidance by a pedagogical beacon, pedagogical doctrines or pedagogical recipes.

The question is; “Why Philosophy of Education?”. Philosophy of Education deals amongst other things with ontological question of what might constitute teaching and education as well as axiological ones about values and norms related to these concerns. This paper concerns itself with the values attached to educational practice, or, for that matter, to educational theory. This is done by focusing on the guidelines that might be used by teachers in going about their teaching mission. In this paper I deal with the axiological question related to being a teacher. I will be arguing that guidelines stemming from philosophical pondering about whom I want to be(come) as a person are crucial for our educational mission.

The arguing for philosophizing over our teaching mission carried out here rests upon a conceptualization of normativity put forth by Göran Björk1. The notion of normativity is in his thesis elaborated by means of separating values – or norms – into three different levels, namely on an ontological, a theoretical and a practical level, thus making it possible to understand norms guiding us as being of either ontological, theoretical or practical kind.

Now let me just briefly say something about the way these three different kinds of norms relate to our teaching mission, before I more closely tease out the traits of each and one of them, thereby making my argument in favor of the ontological kind.

What this conceptualization of normativity does bring about, is an affordance of three different kinds of guidance in our teaching mission. That

1 Björk, Göran 2000
is, when we ask ourselves how we might go about in pedagogical situations, in front of students or in deciding what to teach, there are actually three different kinds of guidance to choose from, in accordance to the different kind of normativity expressed in them.

Firstly, there is a practical kind of guidance, telling you how you ought to – or even shall – go about. The answer is conveyed as prescriptions regulating agency, restrained to the question of how to act. Expressed as moral rules of conduct, this kind of guidance leaves you devoid of any answer to the question of why it would be a good thing to act according to the prescription, or – for that matter – what kind of person you will become if you act in the way prescribed. By way of Björks conceptualization of normativity, we might say that this restriction is due to these norms being anchored in practical regulations only, thus lacking anchorage in theory as well as in ontology.

Norms of a theoretical kind are just that, anchored in theoretical assumptions. The guidance they offer is anchored in epistemologically underpinned assumptions pertaining to ethical as well as educational concerns. Hence, the guidance they offer is conveyed in theoretical doctrines, telling you why you ought to go about in a certain way. Now, while this is coming a long way in motivating our actions not at least to ourselves, they do not go all the way in envisioning the kind of person you realize in choosing to act in accordance with what is highly valued in them. The kind of reflection required in choosing between the options offered by different doctrines is epistemological calculations. Hence, taking guidance by them do not ask for us to philosophize.

The guidance that I am arguing for is the ontological kind. This is the kind of guidance that answers the question of what kind of person you choose to be – or become - in acting in a certain way. By being anchored in a basic value of what “a morally good way of leading your life” is about, this guidance appears in the form of a beacon. Necessarily, turning to this kind of guidance, requires you to philosophize, and by that I mean; reflect on different ways of being in the world and to choose the way of being you want to realize by way of the decisions you make and the deeds you perform.

How come this guidance offers consistency? This is because ontological visions are situated on a higher level than theoretical assumptions and practical statements, while at the same time comprehending them. This means, that there are several possible theoretical and even more practical stances being consistent with one ontological vision, or beacon. Before I go into what that means more closely, let me clarify more in detail the nature of pedagogical recipes and pedagogical doctrines, conveying their shortcomings
– but also the temptations they put up – thereby making my argument for choosing to philosophize about our teaching mission.

**Pedagogical Recipes**

Inspired by Tone Kvernbekk and Torill Strand\(^2\), I would like to label prescriptions regulating our educational mission as “pedagogical recipes”. In telling you how to act and what to take into account in planning, performing and evaluating teaching, they offer concrete guidance to the teaching mission.

Prescribing how to go about, pedagogical recipes affords assurance and confidence, thus a sense of mastery of the complex and complicated educational practice. As Kvernbekk and Strand puts forth, pedagogical recipes amounts to a significant part in the socialization of teachers. They quote Michael Eraut in clarifying;

*Learning to become a teacher and cope in the classroom involves developing routines and shortcuts, internalizing classroom decision-making and reducing the range of possible ways of thinking to manageable proportions. There are too many variables to take into account at once.* \(^3\)

Kvernbekk and Strand refer to Les Tickle’s study (from 1993) showing beginning teachers to “stabilizing the unstable, simplifying the complex and making the unpredictable predictable” when asked to reflect on their teaching mission. Nevertheless, acquiring these “scripts” in the process of becoming a teacher, later has, as Kvernbekk and Strand points out, “thoroughgoing effect upon perception, judgment and action”\(^4\).

The choice of taking guidance by pedagogical recipes – that is, by scripts and prescriptions – is tempting for several reasons. Firstly, because the possession of scripts affords familiarity, thereby making it possible to recognize patterns and even make predictions about the course of events. And by that, the very possession of scripts brings a feeling of competence about.

Furthermore, the possession of a recipe reduces the uncertainty of not knowing how to go about, and by way of that also affords a sense of confidence and security.

But this sense of security rests on the premise of keeping things fixed and unchanging, a premise obtained by converting situations actually precarious, complex and changing into fixed ones.

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\(^2\) Kvernbekk, Tone & Strand, Torill 2004

\(^3\) Eraut, Michael 1994 p 70, In: Kvernbekk, Tone & Strand, Torill 2004

\(^4\) Kvernbekk, Tone & Strand, Torill 2004
Thus, as Kvernbekk and Strand concludes, it is by making practice manageable and affording the practitioner feelings of confidence and control, that the taking guidance of recipes is so tempting to teachers. Now this is truly delusive, firstly in that the issues confined in the recipe represents a lessened reality. As a consequence of this, the recipe most likely becomes self-confirming, in this risking to lend too much importance to some factors in teaching practice while underestimating the importance of – or even blinding us for – others. Also secondly, because prescription about how to go about never can be valid to more than a few circumstances, by implication then risking to be applied to situations actually not valid for, that is in another context, in relation to different students, in aiming at other competencies than it was developed for.

To summarize the affordances of taking guidance by pedagogical recipes then; Mastery of teaching practice, thus is obtained by de-problemizing teaching, selective in-attention, and simplifying the complex relationships pertaining to the teaching practice. Assurance, furthermore, is obtained by reifying tasks and problems as being merely technical. And confidence by simply ignoring aspects and questions of ends and values.

By way of this, there is no reflection, solely compliance, involved in this way of going about the teaching mission. Choosing to take guidance from recipes thus on one hand appears as a convenient choice, requiring no philosophizing. On the other hand, this is a choice conveying consistency in action but a lack of – or rather; a not knowing of – consistency vis-à-vis student characteristics, course context and yourself. Maybe this choice is comprehensible in the light of Erauts observations that teachers seek security of action rather than security of result of action, by that discouraging both reflection and alternative interpretations.

What about taking guidance from pedagogical doctrines instead,? Let me pave my way towards an answer to that question by carefully elaborating their character and mode of guidance.

**Pedagogical doctrines**

Pedagogical doctrines join ethical theory to theoretical assumptions pertinent to the mission of education. This means, that while theoretical assumptions put forth aspects pertinent to consider – such as the nature of knowledge, of teaching and learning, of education etc – ethical theory contributes by providing means for evaluating what kind of knowledge, teaching methods, educational goals and so on, to prioritize. This means, as
Björk\textsuperscript{5} as well as Michael Uljens\textsuperscript{6} have pointed out, that a pedagogical doctrine is a theory about education that is charged with ideology. The choices to be made, is basically about what education should accomplish, as regards to the individual or the society. The reflection required in taking guidance by doctrines is of an epistemological kind and dependent on theoretical assumptions about the nature of man, of learning, of knowledge and so on as well as on evaluations of what “a fully educated man” or “a well functioning society” means and how education ought to contribute to these accomplishments?

Modern-day educational theories do, for example, assume human nature to be of a rational and autonomous character. And in the name of the enlightenment project, they also value those traits as the most important ones to be accomplished in education. Furthermore, also modern-day teaching methods are derived from these highly valued assumptions, developed from theory of cognition or developmental psychology as they are.

Now let me illuminate some of the problems attached to pedagogical doctrines.

First, there is the problem of deriving “ought” from “is”. Why should we necessarily, as for example Uljens\textsuperscript{7} has pointed out, educate for rationality and autonomy? Even though we assume this to be human nature, the opportunity to nurture irrationality and dependence does not have to be shied away from. And by the way; “Human nature as rational and autonomous”, represents an assumption, not a fact, thereby compromising the entire fundament for thinking rationality and autonomy as self-apparent goals for education.

Another problem attached to pedagogical doctrines is the way they tend to reify students and teachers, a consequence of the fact that pedagogical doctrines praise educational contributions to society. Contributing to the needs of society, education becomes restricted to accomplishing vocational and societal competences. Following Björk\textsuperscript{8} again, we may label these competences “functional” and those consequently excluded “existential competencies”. While this makes the student an instrument for societal, commercial or labor-market projects – neglecting her need for learning how

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Björk, Göran 2000
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Uljens, Michael 2001
  \item \textsuperscript{7} ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Björk ibid
\end{itemize}
to constitute herself as a human being – the teacher is, as Uljens\(^9\) has put it, transformed into a technician in service of societal needs and ends.

A third problem I would like to point out is the cultural relativism attached to pedagogical doctrines. Ideologically charged by means of ethical statements concerning theoretical assumptions of the goals of education, they come to hold values valid merely to the context – that is, the society and the time – they appear in. This is, in an example put forth by Björk\(^10\), empirically demonstrated in curriculum documents in Finland, showing democracy to be the ideology of the 1970’s, issues concerning environmental and peace-questions to be the main concern of the 80’s while scientific development and information technology stands out as the primary concern of the state vis-à-vis education in the 90’s.

The last problem needed to be paid attention to is the fact that pedagogical doctrines do afford security, albeit a false one. Of course, taking guidance by means of doctrines do convey a strong sense of standing on safe grounds. But, theoretical assumptions of education evaluated by means of ethical theory, does in fact convey normativity, even though we easily conceive of them merely as theories of learning, teaching and education. And furthermore, culturally bound as theories of education are, they guidance they afford is contextually bound, a fact compromising the security gained since it becomes a security dependent of context, i.e. by the ideologies embraced by one particular society at one particular time.

Thus, the choosing of taking guidance by pedagogical doctrines, is a choice of not doing philosophy, solely epistemological calculations. Because even though there is a need for alternative interpretations of the educational phenomenon we deal with in our teaching mission, as well as reflections upon those – thereby affording consistency in regards to the assumptions we hold vis-à-vis the moral choices we make – the question, however, of who you become in holding those assumptions and making these choices is still not answered.

**Pedagogical Beacons**

In arguing for consistency in our teaching mission, I will be arguing for taking guidance by what I shall be calling “a pedagogical beacon”. A pedagogical beacon conveys normativity of ontological kind in regards to the teaching mission, hence anchored in basic values actually comprehending the nature of a good society, a good life, a good education e t c, although for the purpose set out here applied solely to the question of a good life. A pedagogical beacon states which qualities you value highest in envisioning a

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\(^9\) Uljens ibid

\(^10\) Björk ibid
good life. To my understanding, the notion of a beacon or a vision affording guidance to “the life I want to lead” is also—besides Göran Björks\textsuperscript{11} notion of a \textit{directional basic value}—conveyed in the notion of \textit{ultimate concern} put forth by Paul Tillich\textsuperscript{12} as well as in Charles Taylors\textsuperscript{13} notion of \textit{hypergoods}. Giving expression to “the good life” means saying something about who I wishes to and therefore strives to be(come), thereby fit to understand as a vision of a good life. To my understanding \textit{ultimate concerns} and \textit{hypergoods} respectively, could be interpreted as compromising your most valued vision of a good life, hence the life you strives to lead.

And here is where the issue of consistency becomes associated to the question of who you are, by means of your beacon. Following Björks conceptualization of normativity, ontological visions namely are recognized as situated at a higher level while at the same time also comprising theoretical doctrines, which in turn are situated above and comprises practical recipes. Situated on a more comprising level, ontological visions effects two things in relation to theoretical doctrines and practical recipes; On the one hand, they operate as an agency for the purpose of reflecting critically upon theoretical doctrines and practical recipes while simultaneously, on the other hand, they confer intention and thereby directions to theoretical and practical norms. This affordance of critical reflection regarding doctrines and recipes coupled with the effectuation of ontological visions into ethical calculations and moral prescriptions is the very crux regarding consistency in our teaching mission. That is, that it is by way of coupling critical agency and directional intentionality that ontological visions might afford consistency in regards to the deeds we perform, the decisions we make concerning how we go about in our teaching mission and who we strives to be.

But, no pain no gain. Gaining consistency does not come about effortlessly. It requires an endeavor of reflection about ontological questions as well as on the matter of effectuating pedagogical visions in pedagogical standpoints and deeds. And to me, this seems as nothing else than a requirement to “do philosophy”, and consequently, this is the answer to the question of “Why philosophy of education”, offered here. As the existentialistic saying goes, to be true to yourself you need to establish your norms by yourself, that is; not taking guidance by readymade doctrines or recipes. But in doing that, you choose the narrow, demanding and thus not the most convenient road to go by.

\textsuperscript{11} ibid
\textsuperscript{12} Tillich, Paul 1957
\textsuperscript{13} Taylor, Charles 1989
But let me first, in closing my argument, delineate more in detail the gains of choosing to do philosophy of education. Firstly; taking guidance by ontological norms conveyed in pedagogical beacons means educating for existential competencies, thereby avoiding reification of the student as well as of the teacher. This is to say, educating for the competency of leading a rich, as Björk\textsuperscript{14} has put it, and meaningful life in relating to others and to society instead of educating – as was the case when taking guidance by theoretical doctrines – merely for functions needed at the job market.

This leads to a second gain, namely the somewhat paradoxical consequence of increased flexibility but actually decreased relativism. How does this work? Well, firstly, it does presuppose the beacon not to befall into affirming particular theoretical or practical norms. In order for the beacon to be effectuated in ethical calculations and choices of actions and at the same time manage to direct them, there is a need for it to be powerful enough to hold on to the vision it represents. For your teaching mission, this implies that you might consider different doctrines to go by or recipes to follow depending on the students in front of you, the subject matter you teach, the context of the education, and so on, and still be consistent to who you are. As amongst others Uljens\textsuperscript{15} has been putting forth earlier, this represents a increased flexibility that that should be conceived of as more relevant in times and societies of decreasing pluralism. And paradoxically, this gain goes hand in hand with a gain in genuine teaching authority, a gain stressed by Parker Palmer in saying; \textit{External tools of power have occasional utility in teaching, but they are no substitute for authority, the authority that comes from the teacher’s inner life. The clue is in the word itself, which has “author” as its core. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as authoring their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts}.\textsuperscript{16}

This means – and this is the last gain I would like to point out – that philosophizing means growing familiar with your own true being and basic values, thereby becoming truly in charge of your teaching mission while at the same time becoming, as Palmer puts it “...more surefooted in your teaching”.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus – to conclude – taking guidance by a pedagogical beacon affords consistency to our teaching vis-à-vis who we strives to be, consequently calling for us to do “Philosophy of Education”

\textsuperscript{14} Björk ibid

\textsuperscript{15} Uljens 2001

\textsuperscript{16} Palmer, Parker 2007 p 34

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid p 6
REFERENCES


