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Discourse and Dialogue Regarding Class



“Mahloquet” – one tradition of dialogue and discourse between JEWS

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Summary: Democracy and participation in a Civil Society – at essence – require a political and educative theory of inclusion; our present school systems, however, using examinations and other "standards" for promotion are, most basically, functionally exclusive.

A democratic ideal would nurture rational discourse – which can only take place between equals or those acknowledging each other's ideas as at least "worth considering". If this "equality-to-consideration" is not evident in classrooms, one cannot really expect that society itself will reflect those forms of "discourse-between-equals". Teachers themselves need to accord each student with whom they interact, at whatever level, a respect for the ideas expressed, however uninformed they may be in less-mature learners, or in people new to a field or domain of expertise.

Looking at the global map of school systems we can point out two main currents: one favours THE common school education for all students under one roof until grade 10¹, while the other one adheres to the position of differentiation after the elementary school and sends the students to low-, middle- and high levelled schools². Both positions argue in the name of individualization. The proponents of common education say that it takes time to discern the student's specific abilities and interests which cannot be done before the young person him-/herself has developed goals regarding the future or has evolved a concrete will of what to do in future. The proponents of a multiple-unit school system say that only early separation makes an individualized, student-centred teaching that nurtures and challenges possible.

Although the two positions seem to be contrary, they agree to the necessity of individual teaching in classes, which means they usually agree on a fundamental but not always self-evident principle that teaching in the classroom, no matter whether the lesson transports knowledge or values, is only successful if the student is acknowledged as an individual self that stands above the standards of learning and above the standards and of curriculum contents. If, on the other hand, these standards control the process of learning by determining the given

¹ Although many of the modern western societies have a kind of double-standard of school education separating children in private and public schools from the beginning on, there is no further selection after the elementary phase in "lower" or "higher" types of school education up to grade 10.

² This system of public school education is still practiced in Germany and Austria in opposition to the results of the developmental psychology which is sure that the specific abilities of children i. e. the full individual potential of each child can't be recognized at the age of 10-12.

study time and the study objects, then students ought to be capable of collecting certain knowledge and reproducing it in tests. Most rote knowledge is forgotten soon after the examination. That means that the method of learning at school is largely without a lasting impact, except for some basic cultural techniques like reading, writing and arithmetic³.

The long-term impact of knowledge, however, is strictly connected with the idea of *Bildung*, with the idea of a study process that first is bound to the principle of autonomy (*Selbsttätigkeit*) and secondly provides structures to join partial knowledge to the whole⁴. Such a process of engaged learning (which requires a student's statement like: "I will learn" instead of the teacher's order "You shall learn") is not aimed at expert knowledge but at contextual thinking, impartial judgement and social competence. All of these listed goals of school education express the idea that real and deeper education is not only about how to compete economically and habitually in a highly competitive society or about how to become happy. Furthermore, real education stands in the context of a (morally) improving mankind, in other words, in the horizon of assuming responsibility for the alter-ego and for the future generations.

A learning process underpins principles of self-thinking and morality, since no constitutional state can exist without politically mature citizens, nor can it exist in absence of the acknowledgment of human rights. Respect towards the alter-ego and active solidarity with the weak, is the very condition and indicator of the existence of the constitutional state. That is why political participation and social competence are central subjects of school education, and that is why the state is responsible for the educational infrastructure, since the state - alluding to Rousseau's notion - *is much more interested in cultivating citizens than for instance the parents*⁵ *who themselves might be too uneducated, too selfish or, in terms Marx might have appreciated, too much under economic pressure to teach respect for the law or how to participate in the political discourse*⁶. Seen from this point of view, school education first of all must compensate for

³ Because of the increasing rate of illiteracy in the modern western societies and especially in the industry metropolises, doubts come up about the school's function to communicate at least basic skills for everybody.

⁴ Neither the term *Bildung* nor the term *Selbsttätigkeit* can be exactly translated into English. Both terms are deeply connected with the traditional German understanding of education as an all-embracing process of self-creation with a strong emphasis on moral education. Maybe the Greek term *paideia* is the term which gets as close as possible to this universal sense of *Bildung* differing in only one (but decisive) point that the Greeks acquired *paideia* through leisure (lived-in-world orientation), whereas the Germans understand *Bildung* primarily as a working process on terms, theories and forms (formal orientation).

⁵ Cp. J. J. Rousseau: *Von der Ökonomie des Staates* (1755). In: *Frühe Schriften*. Ed. by W. Schröder. Berlin 1985.

⁶ Cp. K. Marx: *Das Kapital*. Marx-Engels-Werke. Berlin 1975, p 514.

deficits of family education for the sake of the constitutional state (common law) and last but not least for the sake of reason⁷.

If the main duty of school education is to prepare the students to participate in self-governance and to act in mutual respect, then it needs a specific teaching method based on the free will and mutual respect. We call this method the dialogical discursive method to indicate two levels of teaching: the level of empathy between teacher and student, in terms of Buber, the level between “I and Thou” (dialogue), and the level of subject-orientation and problem-based approach (discourse).

Translated into the pedagogic context of class teaching, the student must, first of all, be respected as a dialogue partner, as an equal among equals. The student may know less about certain subjects, but that does not allow the teacher to treat him like a subject or to humiliate him. Since the teacher is generally well grounded in his field, he knows what is important to know, he stands ideally at both sides of the student’s learning process: at the beginning where no knowledge exists and at the end, where the collected information becomes a self-reflecting knowledge, a knowledge which reflects itself as a never ending process.

“But however intense the mutuality of giving and taking with which he (the teacher) is bound to his pupil, inclusion (Umfassung) cannot be mutual in this case. He experiences the pupil’s being educated, but the pupil cannot experience the educating of the educator. The educator stands at both ends of the common situation, the pupil only at one end.”⁸

Furthermore, classroom teaching should be problem-based *to deepen knowledge by deepening the process of learning*. We have to broaden unconnected faculty teaching to become problem-orientated and interdisciplinary subject teaching.

⁷ As much as the common will is not destroyable following Rousseau’s construct of the constitutional state (cp. J. J. Rousseau: *Du Contrat Social ou Principes du Droit Politiques*, 1762, ed. by V. H. Dehnhardt u. W. Bahner. Leipzig 1988, Liv. IV. 4), as much the reason is a fact in Kant’s understanding and can’t be denied (Cp. I. Kant: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1787. In: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Hrsg. Von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin 1902-23, Bd. IV, 1. T. 1. B. 1. H. § 7). So reason, morals and the common will would even exist in a society of devils, because the disrespect of the law proves its existence and its pre-discursive truth. In other words: the acknowledgment of reason is the basic condition of the political discourse or the constitutional state and their result of it as well.

⁸ Cp. M. Buber: *Education*. In: *Between Man and Man*. Translated by R. G. Smith (1947). London 1979, p 128. In German: „Aber, in wie vertrauter Gegenseitigkeit des Gebens und Nehmens er (der Lehrer) auch sonst mit seinem Zögling verknüpft ist, die Umfassung kann hier (im pädagogischen Verhältnis) keine gegenseitige sein. Er erfährt das Erzogenwerden des Zöglings, aber der kann das Erziehen des Erziehers nicht erfahren. Der Erzieher steht an beiden Enden der gemeinsamen Situation, der Zögling nur an einem.“ In: *Über das Erzieherische* (1925). In: *Reden über Erziehung*. Heidelberg 1987, p 44.

That *at first* necessitates, according to the principles of a successful discourse⁹, that all the participants of the discourse speak in a language that all understand which is not taken for granted in multilingual classes. *Secondly*, it is necessary that all who are willing to join the discourse have the same access and the same right to suggest a theme, to define one's position or to argue for or against a particular point of view. *Thirdly*, the discourse can only take part if all the participants are willing to tell the truth as best as they know it, so that they do not hold back facts and information. This search for truth, *fourthly*, expresses the will of the participants to arrive at consensus on the basis of information exchange, which includes the admission that none of the speakers, not even the teacher, knows the whole truth.

Dialogical discursive teaching

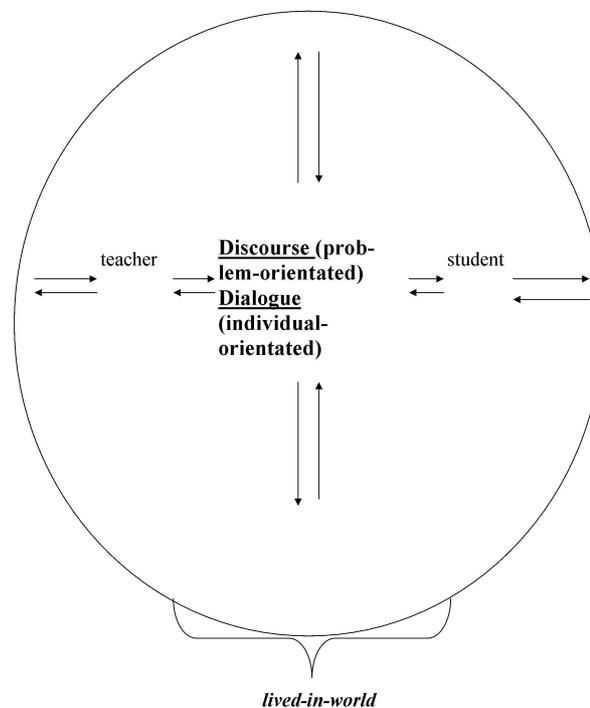


Fig.1 Model of dialogical discursive teaching

In the wider pedagogic context, we can theoretically distinguish dialogue and discourse by defining education as a dialogical relationship and *Bildung*, in the meaning of academic education, as a discursive process¹⁰. Practically speaking, we cannot distinguish both spheres so easily, since educational teaching implies both sides. Obviously, teaching in elementary schools requires more dialogue

⁹ Cp. J. Habermas: Wahrheitstheorien. In: Wirklichkeit und Reflexion. Walter Schulz zum 60. Geburtstag. Hrsg. v. H. Fahrenbach. Pfullingen 1973.

¹⁰ Cp. U. Reitemeyer: Diskurs und Dialog im bildenden Unterricht. In: Philosophie und Bildung. Ed. by V. Steenblock, E. Martens und Ch. Gefert. Münster 2005.

between teacher and student based on the principle of immediate relationship¹¹ and that teaching in high schools requires more discursive structures in terms of sharing and exchanging knowledge. In some sense, every real discourse searching for truth is structured like that, though not every discourse is pedagogical. As long as the discourse emphasizes a teaching and learning situation, it is essentially formed by the immediate encounter between teacher and student. Teaching with love for the academic subject but without love for the students who must be respected as an end in itself, no matter how educated, clever or assimilated the student might be, would not be real teaching but rather instruction or indoctrination. It also requires the pedagogic embracing¹², not only to instruct the students but to teach them *how to learn*, to give them tools to obtain, even on one's own.

Teachers at general-education schools are dancing at two wedding parties at the same time. They are supposed to pre-qualify students for their future professional existence and to make them participants of the political discourse. Regarding the demands of the employment market, teachers must obey the logic of selection. Regarding the requests of the constitutional state, which needs citizens, the teacher has to follow the logic of integration. Excluding certain student segments from well paid jobs, with the help of standardized tests, and simultaneously including all of them in the civil society as citizens with the same rights, is not only a contradiction in itself, but also hard to communicate. Teachers executing this double character of school education - to qualify the students for the competitive economic system as well as for the active and responsible participation in the constitutional state - necessarily caught between two stools and cannot remove this contradiction. But they can decide to either suffer from the burn-out syndrome or to reform school from the inside, which means *in the classroom*. Teachers can decide to give up teaching by rolling up their programs on the basis of routine and habit or by emphasizing the process of

¹¹ The term „immediate relationship“ is my translation of Buber's term „unmittelbare Beziehung“ (between I and Thou). Kaufmann, however, translates the term „unmittelbar“ into „direct“, which does not have exactly the same meaning in German. Maybe the term „unmediated“ is a good approach to a proper English meaning.

“The form that confronts me I cannot experience nor describe; I can only actualize it ... The You encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking. ... The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once. ... All actual life is encounter.” (M. Buber: I and Thou. L.c. p 61-62). This paragraph says originally: „Die Gestalt, die mir entgegentritt, kann ich nicht erfahren und nicht beschreiben, nur verwirklichen kann ich sie. ... Das Du begegnet mir von Gnaden – durch Suchen wird es nicht gefunden. ... Das Du begegnet mir. Aber ich trete in die unmittelbare Beziehung mit ihm. So ist die Beziehung Erwähltwerden und Erwählen, Passion und Aktion in einem. ... Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung.“ Cp. M. Buber: Ich und Du (1923). In: Das dialogische Prinzip. Heidelberg 1979, p 14-15.

¹² Buber understands the principle of pedagogic embracing as a constitutive principle of an educational relationship par excellence in opposite to other relationships which only refer to “embracing” as a regulative idea. Cp. Rede über das Erzieherische. L. c. p 43.

learning as the focus of teaching. In the end, it is the teacher who decides whether the curriculum or the search for truth prevails in the classroom. It is the teacher who must decide between standardization and individualization since the student cannot and depends on the teacher’s guidance, and even more so, if the student is younger.

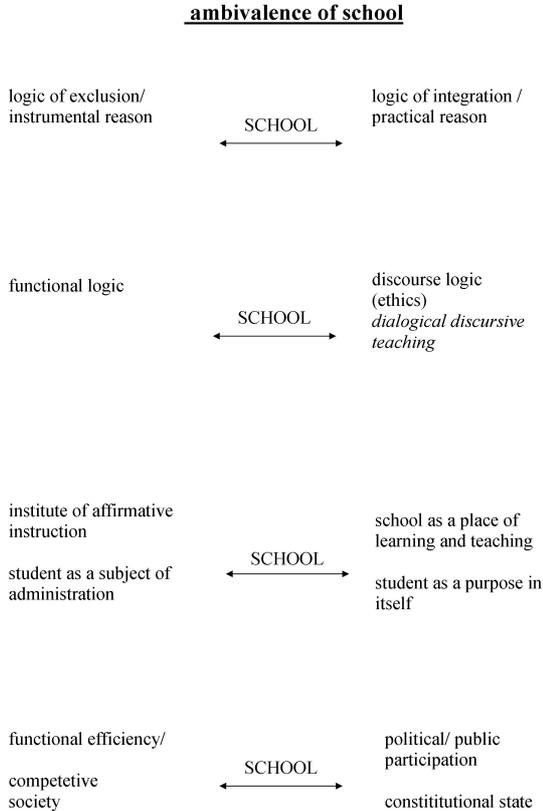


Fig. 2 The ambivalence of school

In fact, educational teaching cannot be standardized, because everyone learns differently and no individual conforms to the average. So teaching every student as an individual is an irreducible principle of teaching itself. Anything less is not teaching but mass-indoctrination. This means teaching is essentially based on a personal and interpersonal, on a unique and non-reversible relationship between teacher and student and is not based on instrumental reason, which is at home only in the world of the “It”, never in the world between “I” and “Thou”.

“I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. ... Whoever says You does not have something for his object. ... Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.”¹³

¹³ Cp. M. Buber: M. Buber: I and Thou. Ed. by W. Kaufmann. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore 1996. p 54-55. The German original says: Ich nehme etwas wahr. Ich empfinde etwas. Ich stelle etwas vor. Ich will etwas... Ich fühle etwas. Ich denke etwas.

Of course it needs infrastructural and administrative support from the world of the “It” to make teaching happen in the sphere of “I” and “Thou”. It needs instrumental reason to make not only the school and teaching work, but also modern societies. It also needs instruction to transfer technological knowledge, which is absolutely necessary to solve existential problems. So pleading for “immediate encounter” between teacher and student pleading for more education than instruction in pedagogic situations does not deny the importance of positive knowledge. It merely recognizes that the communication of positive knowledge does not cover all of the pedagogic activity. Students also have to learn how to criticize which means how to look at positions, facts and numbers from outside the box, as if they themselves would not be involved. This is the perspective of reasonable judgement putting into question one’s own point of view to prevent prejudices and dogmatism¹⁴.

How should one learn criticism if not at school, which represents an outside perspective on the immediate lived-in-world (no matter how much the school becomes a big part of the immediate lived-in-world itself for the student after a couple of years of school attendance)? How is one to learn taking part in a public discourse, if not practicing it in a public room? How to learn learning, if not in an individual dialogical situation? Isn’t the dialogue the basic structure of the political discourse, and wasn’t it Socrates who pointed out the deep connection between dialogical discursive teaching and the broadening of knowledge?

So why *do* we standardize the knowledge, the teaching and the students? We standardize because we think that standards regulate the natural anarchy of human life. We fear that individualization leads to arbitrariness, that everyone is in conflict with everyone else and that we are in a perpetual state of war of individual interests¹⁵. But dialogic discursive teaching does not merely mean to make an individual, egocentric statement, i. e. to just express one’s private and subjective interest. Taking part in a discourse also means to put the single

Aus alledem und seinesgleichen allein besteht das Leben des Menschenwesens nicht. All dies und seinesgleichen zusammen gründet das Reich des Es. ... Wer Du spricht, hat kein Etwas zum Gegenstand. ... Wer Du spricht hat kein Etwas, hat nichts. Aber er steht in Beziehung.” (Ich und Du. L. c. p 8).

¹⁴ Cp. Kant’s preface of “The Criticism of Pure Reason”. In: Kants Gesammelte Schriften. L. c. Vol. III, B XII-XIII.

¹⁵ We can specify this fear as the Hobbes-syndrome, since Hobbes indirectly, i. e. unintentionally, described the civil society as a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Cp. Th. Hobbes: Leviathan (1651). Hrsg. v. M. Disselhorst. Stuttgart 1980, Chap. XIII. Cp. as well Rousseau’s criticism of Hobbes’ state theory in the first part of his second discourse. J. J. Rousseau: Discours sur L’Origine et les Fondaments de L’inégalité parmi les Hommes (1755). In: Schriften. Hrsg. von H. Ritter. Frankfurt 1988. Bd. I.

interest into a relation with a common interest, in other words to discern the common will whose tendency is naturally the agreement and not a never ending conflict or war.

There is a big chance that specific qualifications demanded by the employment market will be automatically co-produced as a side effect when teaching becomes problem-orientated. It needs time to ask questions and even more time to answer them. From a positivistic point of view it may look like a waste of time by providing ample space for discussions when, on the other hand, the full “truth” could be communicated in just thirty minutes. In reality, however, problem-oriented, discursive teaching saves time, because students learn to judge reasonably. A reasonable judgement is as much a condition of scientific cognition as of political participation, and so it should always be the first goal of school education. Individual teaching in this sense means nothing else than the *de-standardization of teaching*. Principally seen individual teaching describes a permanent dialogue between teacher and student and its educational goal is discourse competence.

Aside from noting the almost straight-forward outcome - that teaching happens either in individualized dialogues or it does not happen at all - we have to state that our schools do not typically serve *teaching*, but *training*. Schools have become the training camps of the future working generation and practice social engineering by working as the “riddle screen of the society”¹⁶. We must ultimately decide, whether we prefer schools or educational institutes, whether we want to raise self-standing citizens or small system elements. Human cogs not taking the time to become more self-reflective may be far less likely to produce a system which itself shows awareness and responsiveness to rational requisites.

Maybe it will require an international effort to broaden not only the access to deeper knowledge, but to also free the schools from the selection pressure. Liberated schools and teachers would know how to cultivate future citizens. Under the systematic pressure of standardization schools and teachers fail to even produce basic skills. If we do not reform our schools from the inside, if we do not reform our teaching methods in terms of democratizing teaching itself, no educational reform will happen, and the only reforms will be administrative.

Thus it is the *teacher*, and nobody else, who reforms teaching. If the teacher does not take care of the learning process - and the learning student - nobody does. Looking at the crisis of public education, time is running out to transfer and broaden the knowledge necessary to solve the global problems like global warming, overpopulation, world hunger and the vast oppression of increasing

¹⁶ This term (in German: “Rüttelsieb der Gesellschaft”) has been created by A. Scheunpflug: Evolutionäre Didaktik. In: Die Deutsche Schule. 5. Beiheft. Weinheim 1999, p 183.

poverty. Only technically *and* morally educated people will be able to face the complexity and to work on these problems of existential meaning. The reform of the public education is (perhaps pathetically and clumsily expressed) the key of mankind's survival: because there is no mankind, no self-reflecting history anymore beyond the constitutional state. The way back both to paradise and also to the jungle is blocked, so we have to go forward whether we like it or not.