7. After-word(s)

Published by

Dunne, Éamonn and Aidan Seery.
The Pedagogics of Unlearning.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75668
The gentle but firm respect due to words eloquently spoken requires, I think, that we consider other forms of human activity in response to the essays in this book, rather than adding too many more words. Afterwords can often take the form of weighing-up, critiquing, evaluating, comparing and contrasting what has gone before, but here this is left to others to do so, as they hopefully will, in reviews, in further citing analyses, and in conversation.

No, my intention is not to provide an academic summary but a short editorial indulgence that reflects on the “after” of the essays presented here and the Dublin conference that gave rise to them. I will structure it using the slight conceit of the structure of “afterword.” First, in the “aft” of this undertaking, in the sense of the “at the back and in the rear” of this book, lies an extraordinary extent of human engagement in the forms of intellectual and academic engagement, of physical and organizational activity, and of the establishment and nourishing of relationships. In a culture of avoidance of dualisms of mind and body, physical and mental, and the dubious valorizations attached to them, it is
important to regard each of these forms of engagement as valuable, therefore a little word on each.

Much can be and hopefully will be said about the intellectual and academic engagement that this conference and book seeded and provoked. For one, it has sparked in many of us a new hope for educational theory and its place in an often reductive, stifling discourse about education and its purposes. There would seem to be at least one path towards a “re-Bildung” in educational theory and it is signposted and marked out in these essays.

The physical and organizational activity necessary to bring an exceptional group of people together for this book and the conference is also an educational act of considerable value. There should be, and I believe there was in the case of this project, a special felt quality about a gathering of educators and educationalists that is perhaps not shared by other groups of academics. As a result of a common interest in the way in which human beings negotiate meaning and action in the world and negotiate meaning and the actions of their own selves, educators tend to view each other also in a way that arouses a professional as well as a personal curiosity and interest in the other. The physical presence of one another at a conference, the act of listening to the spoken voice, the experience of feelings of elation, dejection, tiredness, joy, and hurt in the presence of others has a different quality to that provoked by reading the written word. On the other hand, many of the physical reactions felt were as a result of deep engagement in thought and questioning on the written material to be found in this book, and there is a sense in which the “learning” or “unlearning” of the conference/book can be seen in the way in which, in a Žižekian sense, the one is not an addition or a “beyond” to the other but a subtraction; the subtraction of the phantom that the one is prior to the other in anything but a chronological way, nor is one a fulfilment of the other. It is much more the case, the conference and book must be seen as dynamically “self-mediating” in themselves.

Finally, to the “aft” of this book there lies a matrix of relationships that initiated, supported, and completed the project as a whole and which can also be seen as an educational (as learn-
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...ing and unlearning) engagement in its own right. Learning/unlearning is rarely a solitary pursuit or event, and it is fitting that this book is a collaborative effort of thought-exchange, debate, confirmation, and re-assessment as authors prepared, presented, discussed, and then wrote finally for this publication. In particular the role of negation-in-relationship that occurs when people “co-front” and confront their ideas together seems to me to be central to the idea of learning/unlearning and to this undertaking as a whole.

Perhaps it may be claimed that a consideration of what lies both to the “aft” of this book together with what now appears to the reader between these covers lend themselves to the conclusion that what is recorded here has the nature of an “educational event” of learning/unlearning, as also sketched in Éamonn’s introduction to “unlearning” in this volume. Without venturing into any further discussion of the understanding, place, or importance of a currently favoured concept in philosophy for the field of education, the occurrence of this book and the conference that brought these authors to one place can be seen as a rupture in the inertia of what is deemed the “commonsensical” status quo of thinking in education, dominated by the “big Other” of late capitalist ideology of education as workplace preparation and readiness. Perhaps it can be hoped that this conference/book represents an event (Badiou) or an act (Žižek) that irrupts from within a stagnant status quo and that “sets in motion trajectories of transformation” (Johnston 2009, xxix).

Those involved in the hours of careful preparation of a conference or of meticulous and time-consuming editing of a text might well challenge this idea that what is happening here is an unexpected, explosive event. However, a glance to the phenomenological traits in Romano’s hermeneutics of events suggest that our conference/book project on “unlearning” can indeed be interpreted as an educational event in its own right. For one, and by admission of those involved, the project has gripped, seduced, and drawn people in a deep way, calling on them to come into play in their complete selves. For some too, a new world of understanding and interpretation has been opened or estab-
lished in a surprising and unexpected way out of the natural and ordinary lives of teaching and thinking that might have continued in well-trodden paths were it not for the intervention of this event. Then there is the evental experience that even though the idea of unlearning and the conference/book project might have appeared as a disruption in our thought and practice, they also give normative sense to the adventure of our teaching/learning lives. There is a peculiar and exciting and enlivening order in the disorder! Then, of course, there is the question of time and temporality in events. Clearly, the conference took place on dates and days and this book appears on a single day, but the event of being grasped by the “unlearning” idea in its embodiment and enactment in this project is something that indeed, in a way, stands outside of time, heralds and opens a new time. In all of these ways, our project might assume the position of an “event.”

Finally, the afterwards of the afterwords should surely be given some small thought. Three “afters” at least suggest themselves for this book. The first is a renewed sense of wonder at the process and events of education as self-formation and transformation. The event reported here will hopefully surprise readers and even astonish some to the extent of acting in a new and creative way. As Spinoza has claimed in a thought that has been taken up also by Deleuze, there is a particular attraction to us of the singular, of how something like education and learning that we previously knew to be linked to other things in a commonsense way all of a sudden appears different, differently connected, and generates a desire to examine it again and see it in a totally new way.

A second “after” could be conceptualized using the idea from Malabou, that of the disruption of identity by singular and unexpected accidents. Perhaps this book can be seen as an accident, something that had no necessity in the order of things, but that has not only the power to create desire but is much more capable of actually disrupting at least professional identity. Learning/unlearning as presented here is not a pedagogical approach or technique that stands alongside others and that can be employed intentionally in the same way in the pursuit of pre-determined
outcomes and purposes. The idea of learning/unlearning is at an ontological level that supersedes the power and autonomy of the teacher–subject in a startling and disturbing way and from the “outside.”

The final ingredient to the “afters” of this conference/book is the invitation to action-thought. It is quite normal to claim that action must follow words, and indeed we hope that the wonder that follows the surprise of some of the things said here will indeed issue in action; in different ways of teaching and learning; in different ways of engaging with knowledge and students and of undertaking educational research. However, echoing again Éamonn’s earlier words, I am acutely aware of the exhortation of Heidegger to “think” and of the warning from Žižek that what is called for in our present time is not action but thought. Especially in the field of education, there is a tendency to move too quickly to action, to prioritize the practical almost to the exclusion of theoretical considerations when, in fact, what is called for is thinking. Clearly, the kind of thinking envisaged is not of an instrumental nature even though we are dealing with matters of teaching and learning, but it is a thinking that “desires to be thought about” (Heidegger 1976, 6) and as a result provokes and elicits learning/unlearning. It is a thinking “that turns away from man. It withdraws from him” (Heidegger 1976, 8) but which we can hardly help follow, drawn as we are to the possibility that we might find authenticity in epiphany.

So let us be drawn to thinking, the learning/unlearning of thinking, and indeed the thinking of learning and unlearning.

In summary, it might not be too much to claim that the particular historical moment of the publication of this book has the potential to transform the story of educational theory and the life stories of a number of educators in a way that is not limited to an effect only in the present but changes both past and future. I, for one, see my past teaching and learning in a new way and certainly will teach, read, and learn in a different way in the future as a result of the engagement with learning/unlearning, the “Unlearning” conference, and the reading of these texts. I suspect and hope that I am not the only one changed in this way.
To return to the beginning, these are responses that go beyond words.

REFERENCES


