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The Pupil in Didactics and the Practice Theory Approach

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In English-speaking countries, Didactics counts as theory of instruction (cp. Fitch 1880), still carrying the meaning of teaching moral contents and of putting the pupils initiatives aside. In this presentation, the models of the pupil´s role within Didactics will be followed up and, by this, a quite different image will be presented.

John A. Comenius´ (1592-1670) counts as founding father of Didactics on the European continent. In his writings, first of all the didactic principle of Anschauung (visual perception) originates; see here the notion: „Sed veniamus iam tandem at rem ipsam—we will moreover approach the things themselves“. In his Orbis Sensualium Pictus he illustrates the didactical principle of Anschauung, which, deriving from Pansophism, not least allows for the idea of education and teaching as freedom; Comenius writes: „Omnes omnia omnino excoli (excolere means enriching/purifying…)—ennobling and „Omnia sponte fluant, absit violentia rebus—let all things spontaneously flow; let there be no violence to any issue“. In the fundamental figure of Didactics, the so called didactic triangle, going back to John F. Herbart ([1888] 1989, 343f.), the child or student is situated in intimate relation to teacher and content.

In the late 19th Century, Reformpädagogik or Progressive Education declared Comenius, also Jean J. Rousseau and John H. Pestalozzi, as its thought leader when putting the child and self-directed acting, judging and learning to the centre of all pedagogy. Self-directed learning expresses the idea of personal learning by one´s own choice (cp. Lischewski 2010). When the progressive pedagogy movement came to a preliminary end with the nationalist take-over, Didactics were replaced by education. Since the end of the World War II and as reaction on it, practically endless amounts of child-centered didactical approaches have been delivered and practiced. This reached its peak in the 1980ies.
Despite this, Didactics today counts as teacher-centered. The teacher-dominated classroom prevails in classrooms throughout the world, regardless of place or time. Since the turn of the Century and nearly globally, evidence (validity) replaced personal learning by one’s own choice. Accordingly, Basil Bernstein (1971, 47) writes:

“Formal education knowledge can be considered to be realized through three message systems: curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation. Curriculum defines what counts as a valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realization of this knowledge on the part of the taught.”

Neoliberal policies put economically ruled assessment routines and evaluation methods to the foreground. Not only teacher autonomy in the classroom is reduced to absolute minimum, also the oblivion about the fact is kept that didactically approached self-directed learning, now moreover “competence”, does not only concern social(-economic) options of pupils; and—in a second step and only in a few cases of evaluation—their states of mind, needs and abilities, their taste and morals. The social participation of the pupils, their setting up of learning goals and their choice of content plus assessment forms is shadowed. Sabine Sandring et al. (2015) showed that individualizing didactic theories since the turn of the Century diminished to nearly point zero.

I will follow up one possible explanation for this ignorance and oblivion:

John A. Comenius regarded the human as rational being and Creation as cosmos and cosmology, which is independently from age and other circumstances intrinsically accessible to the human mind.

Prevalently Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche had a great influence on making these fundamentals of Comenius’ Didactics shiver: So Piaget’s research shows some evidence that children do not think in rational terms. By seeing human beings as foremost governed by irrationality, Freud deeply questions autonomy. And we know from Nietzsche that the things at hand and the environment are far from forming a Devine cosmos. Accordingly, orders turn out as only conditional and formed by social power, and the ideology of constitution and formation replaces the belief in God’s Creation. Power analyses of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu disclose the inherence of depersonalized power in all forms of government and control. This power threatens and severely challenges democracy and education.

Disclosure of the `who´ through speech and the setting of a new beginning through action always fall into an already existing web, where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom s/he comes in contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose.” Etienne Wenger (1998) names this “participating in practices”. With this perspective, a child cannot but in some way contribute to an already organized structure. Undoubtedly, it needs sound knowledge to decide on oneself, others and to face global challenges. In order to support the agency of the under-aged, adults and teachers are indispensable in supporting them in their personal observations and self-activities by framing, structuring, analyzing and helping them in weighing all kinds of judgement and conditions. This hypothesis receives considerable support from evidence in practice research grasping how a young student develops his or her own perspective on his or her learning.

I will not go deeper into its results, but shortly describe the approach of Practice Research: Practice Research turns the perspective from the top view to the reconstruction of the participants´ perspectives and investigates agency as determined acting; with Thomas Alkemeyer & Christina Brümmer (2017, 709): “By reconstructing the perspectives of the participants the practice of (experienced, skilful, creative, self-styling, etc.) dealing with certain `circumstances´, the resources of knowledge and the available knowledge and knowing resources can be situationally brought into the spotlight. This also counts for the experiences arising in this process; it constitutes and transforms subjectivity.”

The practice theory approach helps to update Didactics and Progressive Education: E.g. the educational turn in contemporary art (Paul & Wilson 2010) describes different educational forms and structures, alternative pedagogical methods and programs that appeared in and as curatorial and artistic practices. Initiatives related to the educational turn revolve around the notion of education, gaining and sharing knowledge, artistic/curatorial research, and knowledge production. The emphasis is then not on the object-based artwork. Instead, the focus of these projects is in on the process itself, as well as on the use of discursive, pedagogical methods and situations in and outside of the exhibition (described e.g. as discursivity and performativity).
The question how to put this into the agenda of Comenius’ Didactics to get knowledge about the things themselves by “ennobling/ enriching/ purifying everything in all regards to everyone, and letting all things spontaneously flow—let there be no violence—“ is here essential.

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