Redescribing 'Education' in Complex Terms

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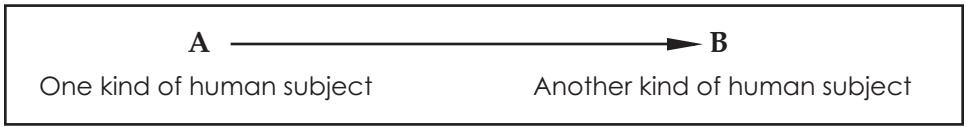
Education—so we might say—is different from untutored learning or *unguided enculturation* in that it directs the kind of learning that takes place. In this way education purposely shapes the subjectivity of those being educated. We could, therefore, say that the function of education is to ensure that people have certain kinds of experiences in order that they may achieve certain prespecified educational ends and so become certain kinds of people (such as people who can be creative, people who can solve problems, or work with scientific knowledge, or be politically responsible, and so on). Since, with education, it would seem that people are always socialized into a *particular* way of life, education can therefore be understood as *planned enculturation*.

Educational environments are designed specifically to move a person—intellectually—from point A to point B. To do this we must know what the starting point is and what the finishing point is. For example to produce 'creative' people, or 'politically responsible' people we must first of all know the nature of the human subjects we are dealing with. Second, we must know what it means to be 'creative' or 'politically responsible.' Then we must have a plan or method to move A to B.



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From a complexivist perspective, the problem with this conception of education—as planned enculturation—is that it is based on the notion of linear progression and determinism (which is, of course, contrary to the logic of complexity). No matter how we look at it, it seems there is no getting away from the fact that education socializes people into a *particular* way of being, which is decided in advance (by the dominant culture).

But since the idea of education as 'planned enculturation'—with its linear and deterministic logic—is incompatible with the idea of complexity, it seems possible that we might be able to use complexity to understand education differently. To do this we have to get away from linear and deterministic logic *without giving up the idea that education is about purposely shaping human subjectivity*. We don't want to give up the idea of education, just the idea that we have to do it in a linear or deterministic fashion. How do we do this?

If we want to shape human subjectivity in a way that is not linear or deterministic, then we cannot assume we know (once and for all) what or who we are dealing with at the outset, and we cannot have a pre-set goal (an idea of what this person should become). We have to participate in the shaping of human subjectivity without this knowledge. This is precisely where the logic of emergence is helpful. With the idea of emergence, educators must try to understand that the only knowledge which they have—about *who* they are dealing with, and the *goal of their teaching*—is a product of the emerging situation itself. This knowledge, in other words, is contingent, not static. We therefore participate in the shaping of subjectivity not from a fixed, pre-determined position, but from a position of extreme flexibility and responsiveness to the moment or space we are in. We educate in what might be called a 'space of emergence.' This 'space of emergence' is a space of radical contingency and response. In it we do not know, for sure, who we are or who we are dealing with because it is only *through* our responses *in* this space that we *become* who we are (see Biesta, 1999; 2004a for discussions of this position in non-complexivist terms). Because it is a space of radical contingency this also means whoever emerges in this space emerges as a completely unique and singular being. From this perspective, if we try to shape human subjectivity in a predetermined way, we *obstruct* the emergence of human subjectivity.

When we use the notion of emergence to understand education we can, therefore, still understand education as being concerned with the non-arbitrary shaping of human subjectivity, but this shaping is no longer predetermined. It is emergent. With emergence, the 'function' of education is therefore *not* to ensure that a desired educational end is achieved, *nor* to socialize people into a common way of being. We can understand it rather, as a practice which always complicates the scene, unsettles the doings and under-

standings of others, in order to keep open a space of difference and otherness—a space of radical contingency—which is supportive of the emergence of each and every person as a unique and irreplaceable being (see Biesta, 2004b for a discussion on this theme).

When emergentist logic is applied to education I believe it becomes possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, *educational practices*, which promote difference and uniqueness and facilitate the emergence of each person as an irreplaceable being and, on the other hand, *practices of enculturation*. Practices of enculturation can either be planned or unplanned. The planned version promotes sameness and conformity and facilitates the production of interchangeable units, a type that fits into a system; with the unplanned version no attempt is made to direct human subjectivity and people are left entirely to their own devices (Biesta, 2004c; Osberg & Biesta, 2005).

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