

SIG 25 Newspaper 2 (EARLI)

Interview Series: The role of theory and philosophy in Educational Science

Interview with Michael Uljens: Introduction

From the perspective of philosophy of science, Michael Uljens here urges the field (and EARLI!) to rethink the conventional links between learning and instruction; a relation in need of careful re-examination due to historical influences. What he suggests in order to deal with reductionist tendencies in psychological educational research is the return to *didactics*: philosophical pedagogy that more seriously recognizes the learner's subjective processes of meaning making, and the problems of teaching. He is especially concerned about the democratic paradox of pedagogical action: a central question for his own "non-affirmative theory" (NAT).

Tina Kullenberg

Non-affirmative theory and its link to Human Science Pedagogy and democracy

Tina: So, what is theory for you?

Michael: Well, to start with, I think I'll stick to a quite predominant interpretation, a common assumption. The one that conceive of theory as something we view with different glasses through which we see the world, you could say. So, on the one hand theory is a perspective that provides meaning to observations, which means, it helps us to interpret phenomena from a particular point of view. But in social sciences theory is at the same time constitutive, I would say. Constitutive on an ontological level: *what* something is. That said, we may say that there exists a *double* tension when coming to theory and practice, if we consider it epistemologically. It makes something with our interpretation but, on the other hand, we must avoid a classical solipsism that tends to result in the problematic attitude that theory is the *only* thing we see. And to engage in a theoretical discussion implies that we compare and share our glasses with each other, in this sense. It also means considering the same world: how does it look to you, how does it look to me? This is the nature of the theoretical dialogue where we can conduct a philosophical discussion about the character of the theory.

Tina: How interesting, can we say that the philosophy becomes superior to theory then?

Michael: Yes, absolutely. I think it is fruitful to keep up a distinction between theory, methodology and philosophy of science. We need a level of reflection focusing what counts as a scientific theory and what does not?

But we need to observe the limits of this epistemological approach to theory. What I mean is that it's of great value that we have distinguished a number of, for example, hermeneutical, phenomenological, critical, posthumanist and perhaps positivistic approaches, among many others. However, only because we adopt a certain epistemological position we haven't yet developed any theory of education. Epistemological positions don't tell us anything explicitly about pedagogical activity and how this activity is related to humans trying to learn. Thus, if you represent a phenomenological, hermeneutical or critical position, then you can study psychological, sociological, educational, economic, cultural phenomena on the same general position of science, and they may have different implications for education. But what's genuinely pedagogical remains often most unthematized. In this respect, it ends up as a kind of philosophical reductionism: you base the pedagogical research upon a specific position of science (philosophy of science).

I can exemplify it now when we are talking about EARLI. EARLI – The European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction. It's my impression from the 90s that EARLI has developed a very strong psychological orientation. At the same time EARLI is a very important organization for having this type of dialogue: what is actually the relationship between instruction and learning? However, much learning research never seriously address the problem of how teaching is related to learning. Instead, a widespread point of departure in educational psychology is a reductionist one; based on learning theory empirical research is carried out, and from there educational recommendations are inferred. Research should of course aim at practical implications from the conducted research but education as a science cannot be reduced to a set of practical recommendations for teachers. Educational science then just would become a collection of practical advices. Remarkably, then we have not theorized how theory explain the relationship between the pedagogical activity and the student's activity, that means, the learner's *studying*, as I prefer to conceptualize it. I mean, in educational learning research we should talk about teaching - studying - learning, not teaching - learning. Therefore, I suggest EARLI should change its name: *The Association for teaching, studying and learning*, or *learning, studying and instruction*. I think European research on teaching and learning has lost the learner as the subject's agency, if we forget about theorizing how the individual's efforts to reach insight, competence or understanding is conceptually related to teaching.

Tina: Aha, and "studying", what's the point with this particular concept?

Michael: It refers to the learner's activity itself. Staying for a moment within a school context: the teacher addresses the student and invites to a reflective dialogue... As a teacher in this situation, he or she typically engage and involve the student in working with a specific knowledge content. In organizing ways of working with the contents teachers hope the student wants to work consciously with these questions in order to possibly learn. Here learning might be understood more as a *possible* rather than necessary result of this pedagogical activity. It's certainly not a causal relationship, though. Just because you as a student are trying to learn something doesn't mean that you actually learn it. Consequently, as a teacher I may try to facilitate someone else's learning, but in practice I don't really facilitate the student's learning, indeed I rather facilitate the student's activity of study. Studying is a concept referring to an intentional activity, something that we do, while learning is something that happens to us. Learning is a concept referring to a process.

Tina: So, it means that studying is primarily about the student's meaning making and not about the learning outcomes?

Michael: Yes, right. Interestingly, teaching, studying and learning are already conceptualized not only within the field of didactics, but theorized early by, for example, J.G. Fichte utilizing concepts as “summoning to self-activity” and “Bildsamkeit”, thereby criticizing Kant’s transcendental idealism. The Fichtean critique was carried further by Hegel and later by, for instance, the cultural-historical approach but also so called non-affirmative education theory. Didactics is the study of teaching, studying and learning.

Moreover, what I think is urgent to bring back on our agenda (within the field of philosophical pedagogy) is the issue of *democracy* and education. Today we really need a comprehensive school system, a school for all, more than ever, the reason being that societies nowadays are increasingly differentiated and pluralistic. The trick of education in modern, plural societies is to create societal coherence, at the same time offering a possibility for the individual to develop her own unique interests. In many societies we see increasing lack of sense of coherence: that we belong to the same world, country etc., yet we are fundamentally different, experiencing different kind of lives; different backgrounds, life-worlds and identities. However, in parallel, the increasing interest for global warming is evidence for that there is an understanding that we indeed share the world.

Democracy is not just a matter of knowledge, it’s a matter of practice. But here it will be tricky. Now it may happen that we have very clear ideas about what democracy is, and should be, and then maybe we want to get the new generation to think of democracy as *we* do.

Tina: Yes, this is a perhaps another democratic problem: we define - and impose - what it is for the younger generation?

Michael: Exactly, and at the same time we have to somehow define it. At least we need to find out what we think is valuable for them, and so we do when we, for example, claim that the issue of democracy is important. Then we actually have emphasized a value and directed their attention purposefully. However, simultaneously as we do that, we have a need for pedagogical reasons to be open-minded and put our own understanding of the topic under scrutiny. Our task is also to teach them how to continue the dialogue, from their perspectives, not only expecting them to adopt the truths we impose on them. It’s not at all finished. The conversations must go on and as teachers we have to provoke them in this sense. I mean, the teacher has to respectfully challenge their values and ideas in a way that expand their awareness of alternative views. As a teacher, I think you have the right to question, for example, students’ biased statements, underlying assumptions and so on. To provoke, or to “summon”, the student for the educational purpose of creating his or her awareness of taken for granted values. Keep them if you like, dear friend, but please be conscious of which they are. You are allowed to think whatever you want on the premise of having reflected consciously about *why* you are thinking as you do. And given that you understand the consequences of your choices. It’s all about provoking them to self-reflection in this sense. However, on the other hand, the teachers’ task is neither to affirm the students’ prejudices or preunderstandings. Again, for pedagogical reasons, teachers are allowed to challenge students’ experiences, values, and expectations.

Tina: How great you brought up this topic: your own theory. Non-affirmative theory on education. Please tell me more!

Michael: Well, the non-affirmative theory (NAT) acknowledges students' different backgrounds, identities and life-worlds but, still, as mentioned, as a teacher you shouldn't affirm them directly, that is, accept them without further reflection. NAT doesn't seek to mold students into pre-determined forms due to the very nature of democracy. Democracy is about the plurality of life-forms. It implies that we, as individuals, must be able to take a stand on different choices. It's you who makes choices as an individual, it's not your family or your partner or your child. We also have voting rights, which is basically individual and, you know, this presupposes a reflective attitude on the individual level but, of course, you can always problematize this, if it then ends up in a too individualistic notion. In any case, the Western model on democracy is based on this.

Tina: Just for clarity, is this "non-affirmative theory" developed by you? Please, say something about its background.

Michael: No, this is not my own theory. The non-affirmative approach as I work with it is based on the modern tradition of education theory. I moved into this tradition in the mid 1990's when working at Humboldt University for a year with prof. Dietrich Benner. Although Benner thinks I have developed it further, as you do with any philosophical reconstructions. I'm not sure of how much I have contributed. What I realized back then was that much of what was claimed to characterize post-modern education actually represented core ideas of the modern tradition. This tradition sees Bildung as the individuals' open relation to herself, others and the world within a non-teleological cosmology. When you see modernist education mistreated as some form of instrumentalism or the like, it's obvious that such authors are not familiar with the theory tradition of education. And it really is a problem that so many education researchers have lost the roots to one's own discipline. For many in the English speaking world education is not even a discipline of its own! This is hilarious as education was established as a university discipline so much earlier than, for example, sociology or psychology, which, by the way, came to replace ethics and politics as the neighbor sciences of education. The modern tradition is much more elaborate, but at the same time I would welcome a dialogue with, for example, posthumanism or the Bakhtin-influenced approach to education.

Tina: Finally, do you see the non-affirmative theory as a branch of HSP: Human Science Pedagogy?

For me non-affirmative theory (NAT) is more or less a HSP theory of education. We should recall that one of the founding fathers of modern education theory, Friedrich Schleiermacher, is one of the main gestalts also in hermeneutics. His main works in hermeneutics were translated into English not many years ago. So, yes, non-affirmative education represents a form of critical hermeneutic human science pedagogy. But it goes beyond Gadamer's understanding of Bildung as human growth by reminding of the fact that theory of education, or pedagogy, requires an explicit position of how pedagogical activity is related to human learning or growth. So, from a theory of Bildung, often dealing with questions of mere contents and aims, you cannot derive a theory of pedagogical activity. In addition, for HSP, as for non-affirmative theory, also explaining how subjectivity relates to intersubjectivity is crucial. Any attempt to adopt any of these two notions as the foundational one is deemed to

miss its object. NAT is much more a “both-and” philosophy than an “either-or” philosophy. Thus we face the challenge of explaining how pedagogical activity and Bildung mediate between different notions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, in order to explain how education is related to how we grow into this world and move beyond it.

Tina: I must thank you for your very intriguing reflections, Michael!