

# What I Talk About When I Talk About Teaching and Learning

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**Abstract** In this text I discuss two events in which I learned something important about life and about education in order to formulate in a precise manner two propositions for my pedagogical creed. In focus for both are the interrelatedness of theory and life. The stories are told through the lenses of Emmanuel Levinas's and Jacques Rancière's thinking, but the stories also are shown to be essential in my understanding of their thinking. The first story is about learning ethics as a consequence of meeting an old man on a remote island and the second story is about teaching, when a young girl in a situation of war taught me something important about political life. In a final section I discuss briefly what those theoretical/practical experiences and memories bring to my understanding of education.

**Keywords** Stories · Teaching · Learning · Theory · Life · Pedagogical creed

In this text I discuss two events in which I learned something important about life and about education. I tell these stories today in relation to other tools for understanding what happened than the ones I had then, and from a position of already being changed by these experiences. My inspiration for interpretation of the stories comes especially from Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Rancière. Yet, I also hope to show how my understanding of Levinas and Rancière comes from those narratives. In connection to this, the text is about the relation between theory and life and how to make sense of its interrelatedness. I am not though claiming a symmetrical relation between these thinkers inspiring interpretations of different events making up a story. Telling a story like living a life is fundamentally not a symmetrical experience. So my pedagogical creed is held together by my asymmetrical stories, rather than by a symmetrical relation between the thinkers I refer to. The stories are not told sequentially, where one developmentally leads to the other; instead I see them as being “connected through the middle”, as Donna Haraway said during a performance in Stockholm a couple of years ago. I'm inspired by her conviction about the importance of storytelling as not being

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organised around cause–and–effect logic. Rather the story unfolds itself as if it has its own life out of reach even for the storyteller and hooks up with other stories in multiple layers. Such is the nature of a story. Even so I want to use the two stories I relate here in order to try to formulate what is most important in education as a form of life. I will be talking about learning and teaching. And following Ranci re, storytelling is just one of the things we actually can do when we claim to use our intelligence—the other is guessing.

### **First Story: About Learning**

I was in my twenties, full of energy. I was, like all other male Swedes at that age, enrolled for obligatory military service. A military service that I refused to take part in as a soldier, since I did not want to become the only really dangerous part of a gun. I therefore did my service in the Red Cross instead. Anyhow, being enrolled by the military entitled you to extremely cheap train tickets for travelling in Sweden during your free time. I decided to take a trip to F r , which is a small island in the Baltic Sea just north of the island Gotland. F r  (in English, “Scheep island”) is mostly known to be the island where the film director Ingemar Bergman lived. Which really isn’t that important in comparison to the mysterious beauty of the island, not least its light and spectacular beaches and stone formations and strangely composed forests, to say nothing of the wind and the sea. During this time the island felt like it was out of sync with the rest of the world. The bus picking me up at the harbour was an authentic 1954 Scania bus. Somehow it felt perfectly normal taking a bus ride in a time before my birth. The bus took me to a guesthouse where I intended to stay for a couple of days, while exploring the island. Biking the island was extremely popular in the early eighties, ever since a famous Swedish writer included it in a must-read novel. It was part of what one as an adventurous youngster should do (even though most of them stayed safe around Visby, the main capital of Gotland, smoking pot and drinking too many cheap beers). At the guesthouse by the sea I asked the owner of the house if there was possibly someone renting out bikes. He told me that there was an old man at the crossroad not too far from where we were. Full of enthusiasm for the day to come, I packed some things and went to rent myself a bike. It was a 30 min’ walk before I could see the house, just to the left side of the road, in front of the crossroad. I quickly entered through the gates and with steps of a young man with a mission climbed the stairs leading up to the front door. I rang the bell. Had to wait for a minute or two. Then the old man opened the door, probably in his mid seventies, heading for eighty. I said good morning and quickly announced my business—I would like to rent a bike. The old man looked at me in silence. Just before it started to feel really creepy he said: “No, I have no bikes to rent to you”. I was perplexed. I did see from where I was standing a hell of a lot of bikes just on the left side of the house so it could not be the wrong house. Then it hit me. I took a step back, took in some air, clearing my head, calmed down and asked: “How is life at F r ?” “Well”, the man said, “I will tell you...” We talked about this and that, small and big for about 15 min. Then suddenly the man said “You wanted to rent a bike, didn’t you? I will give you a nice bike.” And it was. I must say it was the best bike I ever rode, the premium bike, the one and only. So what did I learn?

Well there is no single nature of the story; one could learn many different things. What I did learn then, what stayed with me over the years as a clear insight was the following: I learned that money transactions such as those involved in renting a bike are just that; grounded on in-personal relationships, that is, on transactions having nothing to do with life. If you want to be dramatic about it you could say capitalism is not life. The man did not want just to rent out bikes, he wanted to talk to people, have a relationship with them,

and he probably wanted to “teach” me something. Renting out bikes was secondary to all that. But whatever reasons the man had for acting as he was doing (or the nature of Capitalism in late modernity) something important happened in me. I realised that I had another person in front of me. Not just anyone but someone. And in order to see him I needed literally to take a step back and leave room and space for him to enter into the relation. I needed to give up my ego, my plans, my activity, and passively let the other appear for me as an other that was wholly outside me, an absolute other. But an other for me and no one else within the moment of the relation. That is, his otherness was my responsibility and no one else’s. This recognition made me appear fully alive in the present of time. I was there and nowhere else, released from my ego but not from myself in being for the other. No wonder the bike ride was so good that day, the sky so clear, the sun so bright, and life so mysteriously rich and full.

Of course it is many years later I’m able to put those words to the event, after reading Emmanuel Levinas and thinking about what we often too easily call learning in education through his lenses. But my memory of my insight that day makes perfect sense for me now: If we with learning mean something fundamentally different from stocking up information, something that has to do with life it is a far more risky business than what is often portrayed as learning but also something much more beautiful. So maybe this is something for my pedagogical creed. *Learning is fundamentally about living a life in the presence of others in the present.*

## **Second Story: About Teaching**

This story takes place in the war zone in Sri Lanka in 2000, in the town Batticola on the east side of the Island, then about 70 km behind the frontline. Sri Lanka’s army controlled the town itself but the land surrounding it was a no man’s land. And the town was just barely under control new posters about the Tamil Tiger ‘freedom fighters’ appeared anyway every morning on the town walls. I was in Sri Lanka to conduct a project for the Swedish international development agency (Sida), leading a team investigating the conditions for establishing a framework for future projects devoted to education for democracy. In my usual Monday morning meeting with the team analysing data, and discussing what the next step should be, I suggested that we needed to go also to areas deeply involved in the war. I found it important to do so in order to be as true as possible to the situation at hand. For me it was important since I thought I needed some kind of first hand experience of the conflict in order to better understand what was at stake for people in common in Sri Lanka. Sharmini, a Tamil woman on the team, was to accompany me into the warzone. We were stopped exactly 70 km outside Batticola at a heavily armed military checkpoint. They checked our papers and talked to Sharmini, opened the gate and off we went. The trip into town went smoothly. (Going back, however, was a total different story. We then witnessed an attack from an armed helicopter far out on the left side of the road, a road on which we were the only car for the entire 70 km stretch, the day after a military jeep was blown into pieces by a bomb on the side of the road, killing four soldiers. So the calm and quite beautiful ride into town was a blessing in comparison.) In the town itself we visited several schools, talked to parents, teachers and professors at the university. The university professors we talked to had projects with kids in schools in order to try to counter the trauma of war with drama and other ways of staying sane despite the insanity of what was going on. Sharmini and I were meeting a class of girls, 12 year of age, in one central school. The room was spacious and sunny, the girls sitting in a half-circle in front of

us on dark wooden chairs in their blue and white school uniforms. We asked them about their experiences of school, their daily life and so on. After some small talk one of the girls stood up. She started to talk with a steady and strong voice, with a dead serious expression on her face, and with concentrated emotional intensity she looked straight into my eyes. She said: "I can die by an explosion or gunfire everyday I go to school and everyday I go home from school." Just like that. Simple. Straightforward. Someone speaking. It is just a sentence. But for me I just know that everything I was to do from that moment and on in Sri Lanka had to be a response to that sentence, to that girl, to do justice to her voice speaking. In her voice and in her speech was the entire complexity of the situation made into one simple and brutal truth, which fundamentally changed me.

How then do I understand this story? It speaks about the brutality of war, of the complexity of the foreign aid business, and about the sometimes all too idealistic hopes connected to schooling. Education cannot end wars or bring democracy to a country. That can only happen through people doing politics. But I also learned that despite what can be said about schooling as a process that only confirms an already ongoing socialisation rather than changing its conditions, nonetheless the place, the actual school, functioned as a safe place for particular kids in a particular situation. The school building, like any other building in town, could be hit by a bomb at any moment, but still, because of what was going on inside, the place meant something different for those kids and gave them a feeling of security. So secure that the girl could speak to me in her own voice. Still, the most profound learning I did in Sri Lanka is connected to the girl speaking. She was able to teach me, to speak right through my own preconceptions of the totality of the situation at hand by making it brutally real, direct, and inescapable. Through her speech separate worlds were connected. She changed the very context for how to make meaning of her words at the same time as uttering them. It was deeply affecting me. I was not any longer just hearing her words but was fundamentally moved out of place. It opened a possibility to understand something profoundly new about the situation in which I was implicated. In the speech that unmistakably came from that girl and no one else, she touched something that was unmistakably in me and in no one else. In the moment of speech there was equality in the sense that it reached beyond the social/historical/geographical positions from where the speaking bodies originated. In such speech we can hear the other speaking in ways that bring a certain kind of truth to the forefront. It is the very moment in which noise is turned into discourse and in which the sensible dimension of living a life changes so as not only to understand something new, but also to bring radically new meaning to the world.

The girl taught me something I did not see coming, her voice moved me out of place. It changed what were previously some self-evident facts for me in my world by confronting it with another world. To teach and to be taught, then is something fundamentally different from delivering ready-made schemes. It is about speaking in ways that change the distribution of the sensible in such a way as something can be seen and heard that was not heard or seen before by connecting different worlds. So maybe this is something important to add to my pedagogical creed. *Teaching is a particular way of speaking, a confirmation of a certain kind of equality through which noise is turned into discourse by connecting different worlds.*

### Some Final Words

It seems like things I learn for real I learn on an island! Maybe that is why they say that every man is an island (which I think is a lot of rubbish anyway). It turns out though that

my pedagogical creed cannot be separated from those stories/memories that make up a life and how those stories connect to systematic thinking in that life about how to live it. Thinking and acting are not easily separated. I am still at heart a pragmatist. Also I guess it is thinking and acting on real problems that keeps the world turning. It is by starting with real problems and sorting them out, I guess, which fundamentally make a life. Teaching and learning can be many things but if those events in a more fundamental way are related to life, and not only to how to make a living, then they are fundamentally about particular relations between people. So in teaching and learning no man or woman is an island, rather, essentially one is in relation to another that is not the same as oneself, that is, a relation to another person is a relation across difference. Striving to make the same out of difference is not life. It can be called capitalism, it can be called un-relational in this particular sense, it can be called every man is an island, it can be called how to make a buck, it can be called make a living, but it cannot be called to make a life. And for me it cannot be called education either. I do guess that education is strictly about how to make a life worth living together with others. The judge of that worth is my own and has something to do with speaking as if I have the right to speak even in situations discouraging me of that right, and maybe particularly in those situations. In the stories above, teaching and learning are somewhat interchangeable around a particular point, a point at which there is no learning without teaching and no teaching without learning. I guess this point can be called equality, but not without specification. For learning/teaching in Levinas's sense there is always an asymmetry in that I am always and absolutely responsible for the other, without any hesitation whatsoever and without any claim to the reverse. While for Rancière, there is no relation, at least no political and/or educational relation, if not based on an assumption of equality (in a situation of inequality). Saying that Levinas seek the moral point of view while Rancière seeks the political one can of course solve this dilemma, but only rhetorically and for the time being. What I am sure of, though, is that both of them brings something important to teaching and learning, and that is the idea of an absolute difference necessary for making a life and not only a living. With Rancière this shows most clearly I think in his politics in which he sees that politics is to divide Ochos, the idea of society as a corporeal whole while in Levinas, as has already been touched upon, it is the asymmetrical relation to the absolute other. Despite their differences, what I bring to education, maybe as a dissonance, is the equality required for teaching and learning, which is not sameness, but an asymmetrical relation; teacher-learner, teacher *for* the learner not before him or her, is an assumption of the possibility of speaking, in its most fundamental meaning of speech, across difference, and of hearing that speech, of relating worlds. It is the idea that when we do occasionally speak, and not just talk, we do that from a place/position of absolute difference from everyone else, and that is precisely this difference that makes it possible to be heard, that is to relate to someone other than myself beyond the noise of common sense. Teaching and learning are not commonsensical. If so, it would only be repeating the same endlessly. Teaching and learning are not about making more sense, but about changing the sense. And when it occasionally does so, one is present for another at exactly this moment in this particular world.