

Two Educational Ideas for 2011 and Beyond

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Abstract In this article, I argue that education has come to a crossroads. It is so easy to become educated that the role of the teacher can be seen as redundant. Because of this fact, it is time to reconsider what the teacher does, and whether the aim of clear communication by the teacher can, or should, be an educational goal. I argue that clear communication can no longer be embraced. Instead I offer two new educational ideas for 2011 and beyond. One is that the teacher's role should be a relational role. The other idea is that the teacher's speech should be poetic rather than informative.

Keywords Education · Communication · Teaching · Online information · Speech · Aesthetics

Two Educational Ideas for 2011 and Beyond

To speak about educational ideas for 2011 might be to speak about what the year 2011 has had to offer in terms of educational ideas. Or it might mean speaking about how educational ideas have changed as 2011 has arrived. And these two ways of approaching educational ideas in 2011 would consist of looking at the newest thought in education at this point in time. But I would rather speak about something different with regard to 2011's educational ideas. Namely, What should educational ideas for 2011 be?

For, I find that the particular juncture of 2011 has brought changes in technology and communication that force us to take new educational ideas more seriously than ever. Simply put, the year 2011 is witness to momentous changes in the availability of what can be easily accessed and learned online. It has become terribly easy to become educated. Education is, in a sense, everywhere. Unfortunately, education's everywhere-ness has not yet become a general cause for rethinking educational ideas. Educational ideas have tended to remain the same up until now.

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In this article, I make the case that there is a clear mandate for rethinking education ideas of today. And I will promote two such educational ideas—the idea of relation and the idea of poetic teaching. As I will argue, a mandate for such ideas does not come from educational theory nor does it come from educational practice. It comes from the year 2011 itself. It comes from the events that we will experience now and in the future with regard to easy access of knowledge and information.

Intensified Progressivism

As education has become more and more available, educational ideas have stayed pretty much the same. While vast changes in the availability of knowledge have made knowledge easily and quickly accessed by all people, still, many teachers, professors and educational institutions seem determined to do more of what they have always done, only intensified. One hears statements like this in 2011: “Educators must become increasingly flexible in their ability to meet the growing demands for knowledge in our knowledge-based society,” Or, “It is nowadays the educator’s job to sift through vast stores of knowledge in order to develop curricula that are streamlined and efficient.” Or, “Today it is the role of the educator to be a ‘guide on the side’ while students access knowledge for themselves.” Or, “Education is now more important than ever because we live in an information age rather than an industrial age.” Each of these statements reveals the general sentiment that education must be intensified because information has become intensified. And, they share an underlying theme that progressivism is the best way for the ‘new’ educator to operate. An intensified progressivism is said to be the way of the future.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, this new call for the *same* educator to keep a hand on technology and information includes an unfortunate set of contradictions. First, if knowledge is easily and quickly accessed by *all* people, then the educator becomes a means of *slowing the student down* rather than enabling the student’s capacity. Second, the educator’s role, while perhaps intensified, also becomes *redundant*. Redundant, because informational algorithms themselves have proven quite successful at sifting through knowledge. The teacher is, more often than not, an outmoded analog cousin to such digital algorithms. Third, asking educators to respond to increasingly unwieldy networks of knowledge, or to respond to the ways that students negotiate such networks, is bound to lead to an impossible hyperactivity on the part of educators. Intensified progressivism will never be able to slow down because it will always be catching up. Thus, more-of-the-same actually makes no sense at all in 2011 given the above contradictions.

Why Such Intensified Progressivism?

One must ask, of course, why these contradictions are so often overlooked. Why is there such a fixed and steadfast belief that intensified progressivism is the way of the future in education? The answer to this question lies in the following situation that confronts us in 2011: There is a general trend in the overdeveloped world to treat each and every human practice as if it can become part of school. One might even say that the overdeveloped world is *becoming a school*.¹ Wherever there is a new human practice, or a new production of knowledge, there is a rush to teach this new practice or knowledge. This process of

¹ Gert Biesta and I have described this in [2010](#), pp. 145–157.

becoming a school entails a few components. First, it is taken for granted at this historical juncture that everything that can be thought can also be curricularized. That is to say, if there is new knowledge, there must be a way to package such knowledge in an orderly form for consumption by students. Next, it is taken for granted that all knowledge that *can* be taught *should* be taught. So once knowledge is curricularized, once it is ordered and subjected to method, then it exists in such a form that it can be taught. Not only *can* but *should*. There is currently an unquestioning belief in the goodness of teaching, a belief that teaching whatever can be taught always has its place in the ideal world.

Add to this situation one more aspect—that of language or communication. It is this aspect that I shall focus on at length in order to offer some counter-ideas that rub against the grain of our overdeveloped world *becoming a school*. Working hand-in-hand with hyper-curricularization, and with the idealist belief in the goodness of teaching, there is a belief that language is the primary tool to be used to convey what has been curricularized. Language, it is generally assumed, works on the sender-receiver model. That is to say, human speech is assumed to convey—as if by pneumatic tube—meaning from one person’s head to another person’s head. Or, as I like to say, language is that magic means for taking ideas from the blood-and-guts of my brain and inserting them into the blood-and-guts of your brain. Following this model, the educator’s role is to use his or her language to deliver curriculum to the student. There must be an educator, it is said, so that he or she can serve to explicate the ever-increasing stockpiles of human thought.

In short, two trends are converging on one another. On the one hand, there is an uncontrollable explosion of knowledge sources. On the other hand, there is deep belief in the organization and delivery of knowledge—in the form of curriculum, through the medium of language. At the intersection of these two trends rests the teacher who must be more and more knowledgeable, and who must speak more and more clearly about what he or she knows.

Theoretical Limitations

Now to focus more specifically on the matter of language. If I used a somewhat vivid metaphor of blood-and-guts earlier, it was to intimate that I find the sender-receiver model of language completely flawed. Indeed, many educational theorists have, over the past few decades, critiqued the sender-receiver model on various grounds. Using hermeneutic, Derridean, Foucaultian, performative, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, and relational theory, educational thinkers have argued that language should not be understood on the sender-receiver model. And, many have argued that we should change educational practices precisely because language does not do what it is generally thought to do. Language does not transmit ideas from one head to another in any simple way. Instead, language enacts power, misunderstandings, unconscious slips, relation, and performative iterations just as readily as it transmits ideas—if it does transmit ideas at all.² If this is the case, then one should change education in order to better accommodate the messy and un-anticipatable effects of language. One should stop asking questions like “Did I communicate my ideas well to my students?” and “Did my students understand what I was saying?” Why? Because language does not, for the most part, communicate ideas nor does it, for the most part, promote understanding. One must instead be ready to give an educational account of the *surprises* that language has in store for us.

² I offer one of these sorts of linguistic critiques in Bingham 2002.

Unfortunately, very few educators, if any at all, have been ready to change educational practices following this critique of language. The problem with this critique is that it has remained a *theoretical* critique. The common sense version of language remains the sender-receiver model, and common sense understandings are notoriously resilient to theoretical insight. Indeed it feels like spitting into an ocean when one tries to talk to teachers and professors about the inevitability of *mis*understand and *mis*communication in education. Thus in stark contrast to the recommendations that follow from a theoretical critique of language, the effective speaker remains the bedrock of intensified progressivism.

The Event of Mute Teacher

But in 2011, if one looks outside of educational theory and educational practice, something else is also happening. It is happening without any heed being paid to the rhetoric of intensified progressivism, and without heed to the figure of the knowledgeable speaker. It is this something else that I want to emphasize. This something else might be called *The Event of the Mute Teacher*.

I offer this one simple example. On the web page entitled “Khan Academy,” one finds the following message: “Watch. Practice. Learn almost anything—for free.” And under the Khan Academy logo, “44,942,989 lessons delivered” is proudly displayed (Khan 2011a). Also on the web page is a link to a video wherein Bill Gates touts the importance of Khan Academy. “What Sal Kahn has done,” notes Gates, “is amazing....

He’s taken all this material and broken them (sic) down into little 12 minute lectures. I use it myself to remind myself of things. Children like it. So I was super happy when he came up and we got to talk about—Where does he go now? How can my foundation help him pursue this dream, and connect it up with the other great things going on on the internet?... So I see Sal Kahn as a pioneer in an overall movement to use technology to let more and more people learn things, know where they stand. It’s the start of a revolution (Academy 2011a).

Khan Academy consists of thousands of video clips that enable one to teach oneself whatever one wants. And as the website boasts, these videos are free, they are of high quality, and they can certainly do what they say they can do. They enable anyone to learn anything. Admittedly, the Khan Academy is more heavily focused on math and science. Admittedly, too, the academy, with its sequential staging of online pedagogy, has a sort of pre-modern, hyperrealist understanding that knowledge is something ‘out there’ written on some cosmic tablet. But it is not at all my aim to critique the web site, nor its epistemological assumptions. My point is rather to offer the Khan Academy as one example of thousands of other such places where one can become educated *other than* in a school or a formal educational institution.

Now, if we layer these sorts of pedagogical spaces onto the figure of the speaking teacher who finds it necessary to communicate ideas and to be well understood, we find that the well-spoken teacher is not really necessary in this year of 2011. What I mean by this is that there are thousands of speaking teachers available at anyone’s fingertips, and it is very likely that the teacher one encounters at school or at university is *less* knowledgeable and *less* clear-spoken than another teacher who can be found online. For each teacher, there are quite a few Khan Academy’s. It is in this sense that I say that the event of the mute teacher is upon us. There is not much need any more for the teacher to speak

clearly. As Khan Academy boasts, “Views: 24,000,000. Faculty: 1” (Khan 2011b). Others are always at hand to speak for him or her, and to speak better.

A Practical Return to Theory: Relationality and the Art of Teaching

Importantly—and this is the crux of what I have to say about educational ideas in 2011—this event of the mute teacher forces one back into a situation where there is a choice to make between three options. First, one can cling to the sender-receiver model, emphasizing communication and clarity—and thereby hallucinate away the fact that the teacher does not actually need to speak in such a way any more. Such is the case at present. Second, one can cling to the Kahn-type model and decide that there is absolutely no need for the teacher. This is unlikely to happen given the ubiquity of educational institutions and their place in the structure of overdeveloped societies. Or third, one can reconsider an account of speaking that does not have to do with clarity of understanding. It is this third option that yields my two educational ideas for 2011.

Relationality

The first idea is this. The language of the teacher need not be communicative, nor need it be aimed at clarity. It can rather be considered a matter of relationality. Stripped of its propositional content, language still does something. It works at the affective level to form bonds of human connection (and, of course, sometimes to sever those same bonds). As I have argued elsewhere, relationality is much more central to the educational endeavor than what we learn or how we learn it.³ Why do schools remain if not for meeting? The very existence of schools is surprising. In this age of books, libraries, TV, DVDs, and the internet, schools are not the only place to get information. Why do schools remain? They remain because education is primarily about human beings who need to meet together, as a group of people, if learning is to take place. In schools, it is true that we meet and it is true that we learn. But education is primarily about human beings who meet. Education and meeting are inseparable.

So one educational idea for 2011 consists in reclaiming the relational role of the teacher. For, while education is truly available in abundance in 2011; while there are phenomena like the Khan Academy wherever one looks—nevertheless, there remains a fundamental difference between a school and any other sort of educational resource. When people come *together* to learn, this is different than when they learn online or in libraries. In a school, there are teachers. And teachers *relate* to their students. That is to say, teachers are not necessarily destined to be mute in this day and age. The teacher still has the role of one who creates the circumstances for belonging and meaningfulness. When a teacher is in a classroom, he or she has the crucial human role of drawing people together. Without the teacher, a school is just like any other of the myriad places people can learn. With the teacher, the school can become a community.

The Art of Teaching

The second idea derives from a reconsideration of what is *said* by the teacher. For, while it is easy to slough off language as purely relational, there does remain a content to

³ I describe this relational role of school in Bingham 2008, and Bingham and Sidorkin 2004.

speech. Such content must be dealt with carefully if it is not to return to the status of some 'clear,' explanatory speech that might as well be mute. I propose a reconsideration of the poetry of the teacher's words. When the teacher speaks, it is not necessary to consider his or her speech as the explanation of ideas so widely available elsewhere. One can instead consider what the teacher says as the translation of an experience. Such a translation is no different than the work of the artist, and, in particular, the work of the poet. To examine teacherly translation, consider the following poem by William Carlos Williams (1923):

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends.
upon.
a red wheel.
barrow.
glazed with rain.
water.
beside the white.
chickens.

The poet offers us the presentation of an experience. He offers us a wheel barrow, rain water, and white chickens. These artifacts, whether they are imagined or real, are experienced by the poet and a work is created. An experience is translated into a poem and the poem is available for translation by the reader. The poet does not explain or make clear a wheel barrow, or rain water, or white chickens. It is not as if there were such a thing as a particular barrow, a particular drop of water, or a particular chicken that might be clearly understood in a general sense. And the reader of the poem is not called upon to understand exactly what the poet has in mind. The reader is rather left to *counter-*translate the poem into his or her own experience. The reader will render the barrow, the water, and the chickens intelligible as best he or she can *without* the aid of the poet him or herself. While the poet has endowed the poem with meaning, such meaning is not delivered by the sender-receiver model of language. The words of the poet have a life of their own that defy explanation, a life that will be *shared* by the reader but not *understood* by the reader.

It is thus that the teacher need not be mute, even if education does not really depend upon the teacher any more. Indeed, we are at an important crossroads in this year of 2011. We are witnessing a time when the old adage that "teaching is an art" can be understood in a way that is more relevant than ever. Teaching must become an art in 2011 because teachers are now called upon to speak in ways that are more genuine and more poetic than ever. And when I say that teaching should become an art, I do not mean that art is a good metaphor for the way we teach. I mean something much more profound. I mean that we should speak in artistic ways. I mean that our work should intervene in life rather than describe life. I mean that we should offer renditions of life to our students. Renditions that are our own, not anybody else's. We should offer poetic utterances for our students to savor.

That The Classroom Might Become a School

In a way, of course, these two ideas of 2011—relational and poetic—are very old ideas. If we think back to earlier times, and to earlier educational practices, there is a sense in which the teacher used to be, once upon a time, in a position to act relationally and speak poetically. Even the word “school” depends on a more poetic connotation than it usually carries nowadays. School is more than a building. It is a place where people relate to one another under the guidance of one who speaks in a unique fashion. It is, according to the history of the word, a place of leisure. Today, of course, we have replaced this older notion of school with a modern version of the assembly line, where certifications are churned out. The school is a series of classrooms, each classroom having its own specific purpose in the production process of the finished product, the graduated student. Of course, the very word “classroom” demonstrates what is lost in this assembly-line transformation. “Classroom” is a redundant word that makes no sense at all. It means “room-room.” In our “classrooms” we find “textbooks”—another redundant word of nonsense, meaning “book-book.” And in our classroom with their textbooks, we now find teacher who are themselves becoming redundant in 2011.

If the teacher is relational, and can speak on his or her own as a poet, then there is little need for the educational redundancies that even our language currently reminds us of. If the teacher is relational, then the classroom ceases to be a room that is the same as any other room of equivalent grade or subject matter. The classroom ceases to be a step on an assembly line. Instead, each classroom becomes itself a school—a school where unique relations are fostered by particular teachers. And if the teacher is a poet, then what is commonly known as a “textbook” becomes rather the content and context for poetry. Whatever subject matter there is to be learned becomes a new sort of subject—a subject for artistic rendition. A subject waiting to be interpreted by the student, not understood through some clarity of speech. Thus in 2011 and beyond, education might be informed by relation, enacted through poetry.

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