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Learning in the process of civilisation. An attempt of pedagogical reading of selected themes in Norbert Elias' theory

The aim of my article is to theorise the category of learning in the light of selected strands of Norbert Elias' theory. I will look at the function of learning in the process of civilisation, as well as the learner. Therefore, the aim of the text is to reconstruct Elias' thought in the context of the transformation of learning in the process of civilisation.

Reflection concerning learning belongs to the field of general pedagogy, but through its intrinsic connection to education it is an important complement to the field of the philosophy of education. In the context of the development of civilisation, I perceive learning as an area of normative construction. Who the learner is, and how learning changes over time, is a significant question when considering education. Currently, learning is perceived as a natural phenomenon, which can be seen especially in the discourse of lifelong learning, as well as in the discourse of competence, personal development, or the career discourse. Gert Biesta even writes about the learning orientation of educational discourse. This can be seen for example in speaking about students as "learners", and about schools as "learning environments". Whereas adult education has become a lifelong learning (Biesta 2013: 5). The existing critical analyses show that discourses built around the category of learning can serve the purpose of social arrangement (Ostrowicka 2013; Szkudlarek 2017; Szkudlarek, Zamojski 2020). I therefore propose to look at these transformations in the context of the development of civilisation.

Learning as "a process in the course of which, on the basis of experience, cognition and exercise, new forms of behaviour and action are created or the previously

acquired forms are changed” (Okoń 2004) has not traditionally been analysed from an Eliasian perspective, even though learning functions as an integral part of the process of civilisation. This is because it requires continuous learning. Looking at how it is a socio-cultural process in a civilizational manner will complement previous analyses of Elias’ theory with a pedagogical perspective.

Learning in the theory of Norbert Elias

Civilisation is, according to Elias (2011), the gradual elimination of coercion in favour of more subtle, invisible forms of it, which make us feel embarrassment or shame towards certain behaviours, even those previously practised. Even though it does not focus on the category of learning itself, it is possible to reconstruct from Elias’ analyses how learning and becoming a learning individual is the norm that defines our civilisation.

By analysing habits and behaviours, Elias shows that learning was integral to the process of civilisation. At its beginning, learning was linked to the state or spiritual development of the individual, as reflected in Plato’s *State* and also in the *Bible*, where Jesus is referred to as a Teacher. However, in the process of civilisation learning was gradually attributed to the acquisition of culture, which Elias reconstructs by analysing the norms of behaviour contained in the codes of chivalry. He writes that with the development of civilisation, the need to manage human affect and drives increased until it became an internalised rule. Among other things, it analyses court etiquette in detail, showing how successive strict rules civilised people. Today, we rely on rules that have already been relaxed, which is made possible by the self-management principles we have learned. These have developed as a result of four pressures: 1) resulting from man’s animal nature, 2) resulting from other natural processes, 3) arising from social life, so-called social pressures, and 4) internal pressures that the individual imposes on himself, otherwise known as self-control. The last two are the most significant in the civilisation process, and their role is increasing processually.

Elias links the progressive self-control at the level of moral norms to the transformation of forms of state power. Civilising learning consists of institutionalisation as well as instrumentalization, and balancing the control of the state and parents, and then the individual, over their own learning. A key category for Elias is upbringing, which he understands as modelling, whereby we learn the emotional and cognitive constructs that allow us to understand the social world. Children are formed to live in a particular society, learning what it means to be a member of that society, to behave according to the accepted rules and to restrain their emotions so that the accepted social form can survive at all. In his essay *The civilizing of parents* (2008), Elias wrote about the individual civilizing process of children, i.e. becoming adults

and thus learning gradual self-control and anticipation of their own behaviour. Children are gradually subjected to the authority of institutions, i.e. the nursery, kindergarten, and school, acquiring not only new knowledge but also learning appropriate behaviour.

This shaping allows an individual to direct his or her behaviour in a conscious manner rather than depending on drives. Elias assumes that people have biological instincts that are managed within a specific social context. At this point analyses of Elias' theory cite the example of the death drive, which has been civilised in some cultures by the encouragement of combat and in others by the encouragement of a consumerist lifestyle or emotional investment in sport (Lybeck 2019: 132). Over the centuries, according to Elias, a similar function has been performed by teaching manners, as he demonstrated by analysing Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Manual of Manners* or the historical changes in the perception of the role of the child. In the context of learning that interests me, this is the centuries old development of concepts in the field of educational theory towards bringing out the individuality of the child, as well as the transformation in the perception of learning as the responsibility of the individual.

In the changes concerning the social understanding of learning, we can observe a process of gradual transformation of our thinking about learning up to today's perception of it as a lifelong process. Therefore, learning has become the task of an individual throughout his or her development. Secondly, the changes associated with the properties attributed to learning are gradual and processual. The various functions and learning objectives do not displace the following ones, deriving from each other.

Researchers of Elias' theory link the transformations of learning and education described above to the assumption of a dominant social role by the bourgeoisie during the French Revolution and Restoration, which led to the emergence of a kind of "romantic ethic" of the modern consumer (Campbell 2005). In parallel, a gradual differentiation of forms of education by social class can be observed. More authoritarian forms began to be attributed to the lower classes, while the middle class became associated with more egalitarian forms.

As shown by Elias, the emergence of a system of universal education was not the result of a spontaneous interest in knowledge. Rather, it resulted from the societal belief that children should not be raised solely by their parents. Schools, as shown by Elias, have become a central tool in the process of civilisation. The upper class began to send their children to boarding schools, the bourgeoisie, in imitation, sent their children to similar types of schools, while the working class began to address courses in running a house, which can be considered one of the earliest forms of popular education. In Victorian societies, the school constituted evidence of social advancement, while the education of the lower classes was a gift to the primitive through which they could learn how to conduct their affairs

responsibly. Children who enrolled in these institutions were gaining social power – they were given the tools they needed to navigate this increasingly complex world. In an increasingly diverse and “civilised” society, where long-term planning and specialised knowledge dominate, it is knowledge that has become a form of power. This in turn established the need for education, including an expanding higher education sector (Lybeck 2019: 143–144).

Despite the evolutionary development of the category of learning towards the development of an individual, we should not lose sight of the aspects of learning related to social management, i.e. the control of drives, as well as phenomena with decision-making potential. The researchers point out that contemporary popular thinking about learning at any point in life is dominated by a technical and normative understanding of learning. This type of approach can trivialise the process without being able to maintain a critical perception on whether we are really, apart from the amount of information, learning anything that changes us (Maliszewski 2011: 35). Witkowski even writes about the end of the culture of learning, arguing that the massification of education and training has made it impossible to reflect deeply on the content being absorbed:

Permanent education can permanently wean off motivation and the need to “learn”, equipping individuals with the efficiency of a banal habit of schematic, unreflective actions (Witkowski 2009: 106).

The transformations of learning described above exemplify how civilisational and de-civilisational trends are intertwined in learning. On the one hand, learning reinforces an individual and has an impact on the possibility of advancement in the social structure. However, on the other hand, an unreflective model of learning, manifested in the collection of successive certificates or course diplomas, may not bring about real change in the individual and thus fail to fulfil the civilisational function of reducing the social distance between individuals. It even constitutes an area of increasing competitiveness and a gradual loss of autonomy in favour of becoming a collector of knowledge.

Learning is becoming an exalted process that requires continuous improvement. New techniques are emerging to constantly develop the ability to learn. Further elements related to learning technology are emerging in the public discourse: brain development, the use of appropriate exercises, diets and habits to make lifelong learning a habit. In them, the human being becomes a learning machine. According to Elias’ theory, it is an increasingly complex figuration, so it needs more and more regulatory mechanisms.

In today’s society, referred to as a knowledge-based society, lifelong learning, indeed in every life situation, is becoming a desirable way of functioning and its effectiveness an indicator of social utility. The contemporary discourse of society

based on knowledge suggests that the knowledge-dependent economy relies on constantly learning individuals, whose knowledge and skills are assets for driving economic growth. Education, in this view, is an investment and investing in an individual is investing in human capital. However, the perspective of investing in human capital, driven by the logic of competition, is counterbalanced by the concept of investment in social capital. In this way, the focus goes beyond individuals to include their communities, families and cultures, all requiring investment and learning. Ultimately, the complex interaction between knowledge, politics and the economy is thus mediated by education, often referred to as learning (Szkudlarek 2016: 79). These transformations, read in an Eliasian perspective, allow looking at the knowledge-based society as the following stage in the civilisational development of Western societies, and at learning as the key area of social normativity construction for this phase.

There is another element to looking at learning as an area undergoing civilisational change and it is related to the technical development of societies. In his text *Technisation and civilisation* Elias (1995) writes that technicisation is linked with the development of civilisation. As part of this process, people are learning to use technology to improve their standard of living, just as they have historically learned to use fire or motorization. Today, in the face of the greatest technological development in history, we as a society are faced with the opportunity for enormous progress. In the process of learning, we have gained new tools, above all artificial intelligence, but the acquisition of knowledge is no longer attributed solely to humans.

According to Elias, technological development requires involving the entire society in the adaptation process. The view that technological development requires a social process of adaptation underlines the significance of collective learning in the effective management of new technologies. As innovation arises from the collective efforts of innovators, society as a whole must learn to take advantage of these technologies safely and responsibly. This underlines the social nature of technological learning and the need for individuals to develop self-regulatory mechanisms to navigate the complexities of a technologically advanced society. Emphasising the role of self-control and self-regulation in reaping the benefits of technological advances while minimising risks and negative impacts, Elias presents a complex understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with technological change. He points out that technical progress gives impetus both to improved development and growth as well as in the opposite direction, thus generating regression. Therefore, acquiring and developing new knowledge can have both civilisational and de-civilisational potential. Alongside functional democratisation, there is also functional de-democratisation, which can be a reaction to democratisation processes. The de-civilisation of the formation of information bubbles, the spread of fake news or the alienation of individuals,

whose lives are inextricably linked to the constant use of smartphones, can have a decisive impact in this context.

Analysing the contemporary discourse concerning learning and technology, it is easy to see that elements of moral panic are emerging around selected aspects of learning. This concerns the use of artificial intelligence in the learning process for children and young people, or the fact that machines learn too quickly, which can lead to them being highly competitive on the labour market compared to humans. According to Elias's theory, as a result of moral panics, so-called "civilisation offensives" emerge that aim to restrain problematic trends or, in Elias's language, to civilise the less civilised. In the case of moral panics surrounding learning and technology, we can observe a tendency to emphasise the importance of "honest" learning, to criminalise the use of technology in learning, and to link machine learning to safety and morality. Therefore, we are talking about the good and bad use of technology, but also about the immoral co-creation of knowledge with technology, as we can see in the context of the discussion on the use of artificial intelligence in schools.

Parallel to the described processes, the notion that we learn for ourselves is alive in the public consciousness. In general, learning constitutes an unequivocally positive process. However, this makes it difficult to grasp the tension between learning as a process that is needed and good for the individual, and a regime that disciplines and fills them with anxiety. In the perspective of Elias's theory, the construction of the learning subject becomes a field of civilisational tensions.

Civilising the learning individual

Using Elias's theory, I look at a learning individual as undergoing a process of civilisation. One of his key concepts is the critique of *homo clausus* – the closed, unlearning human being, characterised in the essay *Thinking Statues* as a separate entity created by philosophy and sociology. He subjected the cognitively closed "living statue" to criticism, which he extended to the Kantian conception of man:

In this juxtaposition of an objectivist theory of time with a subjectivist one, a fundamental property of the traditional philosophical theory of cognition becomes apparent. It accepts that there is a universal, eternally reproducible starting point, a kind of zero point of knowledge. According to this perspective, each individual faces the world all alone – as subject before object – and begins to know (Elias 2017: 24–25).

Therefore, man learns about the world as a member of society – and in doing so, uses the tools with which that society equips him. As Marta Bucholc writes in the introduction to *Esej o czynie*: "Cognition of the world never and for no one starts

from scratch, it is never pure, and it never remains isolated either – it is always included in a process whose subjects are communities on an equal footing with each of its members. Thus, a person acts, learns about the world, and communicates knowledge about it, being neither fully dependent on others nor fully free, but, as Elias put it, ‘semi-autonomous’ or ‘relatively powerless’, both vis-à-vis the human world and vis-à-vis the natural world” (Bucholc 2017: 9–10).

Man in the process of history is shaped, according to Elias, by human relations, forms of life and figurations. Drives undergo modelling and people acquire lifestyles defined by interpersonal relationships:

The question of why people’s behaviour and emotional structure is changing is essentially a question of why the forms of human life are changing. The medieval society developed certain forms of life, and the life of an individual was shaped within these forms, whether as the life of a knight, a guild craftsman, or a peasant. Societies of later phases opened up other possibilities for the individual, developed other forms of life to which the individual had to adapt [...]. This is essentially the same question as the question of what causes the structure and functioning of drives, the pattern of emotional life, and all that this entails to change (Elias 2011: 272).

The critique of *homo clausus* is extremely useful for thinking about the learner. That is because Elias creates a conception of man as an open personality, departing from the Cartesian model, destroying the vision of man as an absolute unity. It is dependent on and shaped by others, regardless of the degree of autonomy attributed to it. The process of civilisation he describes constitutes, in other words, changing individual structures under the influence of changes in figuration.

Elias concludes that the structure of the emotional life of people of other eras was different from ours. As a society, we have modelled a sense of shame, which has led to the formation of a predictable individual. Self-control is, for Elias, a symptom of the progress of civilisation:

People who eat according to medieval rules, take meat with their hands from the same vessel, drink wine from the same bowl, scoop soup from the same pot, or plate – not to mention other peculiarities of their behaviour [...] – these people have a different relationship to each other than people of our time. And not only in the sphere of consciousness, in the sphere of conscious and specified motivations, for the structure and different nature of their emotional life is different [...]. What is lacking in this world [...] is this invisible wall of emotional tensions that rises between people’s bodies during our times, separating them and pushing them away from each other (Elias 2011: 139).

Therefore, civilising the learner is a process of restraining affect and behaviour in order to achieve a more predictable and guided learning process. On the basis of Elias’ theory, we can reconstruct a lifelong, complex and time-varying process that includes developing habits, patterns, and even the stimulation and shaping of the learner’s body. This is because shaping the learning process is not only about

acquiring intellectual competence, but also about building a modernist body with the desired affective, perceptual, and motor functions (Rakoczy 2023: 88).

In the process of civilising the learner, we are dealing with changing methods and techniques over time, transformations in the field of teaching, changes in didactic paradigms, and the production of more inclusive and democratic discourses of learning. However, all these changes are part of the same civilisational process, because democratisation and egalitarianisation are derived from civilisational processes aimed at normalising behaviour. Modern states, as Elias notes, have undergone processes of inclusion of ever wider social groups independent of nation-building processes. Therefore, it was necessary to create mechanisms for regulating behaviour in such a way that a broad spectrum of individuals from diverse social groups could function within it. Democratisation and egalitarianisation in the learning process thus constitutes, in this view, an offshoot of these transformations and is linked primarily to the spread of mass schooling.

In considering the construction of the learner in an Eliasian perspective, it is important to refer to the category of childhood, as it is childhood learning and socialising that for Elias constitutes the image of an individual's condition. A key question for him is: when does the transformation of children into adults take place? In other words: how do people learn to function in increasingly complex figurations? Elias acknowledged the belief that children are unready human beings who must be administered by adults as socially constructed. According to him, both adults and children are elements of the civilisational process within which forms such as childhood and adulthood are constructed.

Civilising the learner has the effect of creating the belief that learning is a lifelong obligation. Biesta makes a similar note, writing that nowadays, instead of a right to learn, we have an obligation (Biesta 2013). He writes that constructing a learner is a process of the Foucaultian *dispositif* in which an individual begins to identify with the demand for lifelong learning. Writing about the *learnification of the learner*, he points out that the identity of the learner is encapsulated by tasks, requirements, and responsibilities that should be the responsibility of the entire collective. Within the learning policy, a learner identity is produced – it can be internalised or discarded as a gesture of emancipation (Biesta 2013). This account of discipline in the policy of learning can be related to the mechanisms described by Elias in the process of civilisation.

The learner is disciplined and managed primarily through shame. Not learning is one of the most frequently shamed behaviours at school. It is punished with bad grades and may also be the object of derision or ridicule. This was aptly captured in the historical process by Marta Rakoczy, analysing the literacy process of young children in pre-war Poland, showing the importance of shaming children into belonging to the dark ages and the associated moral panic (Rakoczy 2023). Currently, children are no longer embarrassed in a similar way and teaching has changed, but

grades and speed of progress still play a key role in educational success. As shown by research, children and adolescents continue to be embarrassed at school, not always solely because of their learning, even though the progress in learning is an important pretext (cf. Kopciwicz 2011; Goodman, Cook 2019).

However, the learner is not civilised by shame alone. Fear is also a key element. That is because not learning can lead to a deterioration in one's life situation as a result of a lack of educational success. This situation gives rise to anxiety, which Elias wrote about as follows:

Anxiety [...] thus acts directly as a driving force to stimulate adherence to a code of behaviour, to develop a superego in the individuals belonging to it. This anxiety transforms into individual anxiety, into the individual's fear of personal degradation or just a decline in their prestige in their own community. And it is this fear of being discredited in the eyes of others, assimilated as an internal compulsion and manifested in the form of either shame or a sense of honour, that is the factor that ensures the continued habitual reproduction of distinctive behaviour and, consequently, a sharper regulation of drives in an individual (Elias 2011: 518–519).

The fear of being unlearned, and therefore a fool, a failure, or a simpleton, is one of the most widespread civilisational anxieties present in the lifelong experience. Its civilizational importance in the world of children is evident in proverbs (e.g. *What Johnny didn't learn, John won't know*), as well as the popular fairy tales of *Koziołek Matołek* or *Nieumiałek*. In the experience of adults, to be unschooled is to be socially degraded, associated with low social class as well as low intellect and thus intellectual disability. In the case of adults, not learning can even lead to brain deterioration, as described in popular press articles encouraging lifelong brain exercise (cf. *Wykształcenie i zaangażowanie w życie towarzyskie pomagają chronić przed demencją. Badanie*)¹. Therefore, failure to learn risks the loss of brain function and, consequently, the degradation of the human being as an independent individual.

Elias writes that as long as we function in society, we will not be able to get rid of anxiety. That is because its source is other people. Anxiety is also, according to Elias, a necessary condition for the process of transformation of children into adults. It becomes stronger the stronger the need to maintain status or social advancement.

Even though the modern rise of populism has introduced the glorification of anti-intellectualism, it has not abolished the fear of unlearning by introducing alternative sources of knowledge in the form of in-house experts or by appealing to the will of the people. In his book *The American civilising process*, Stephen Menell (2007) shows how in the process of civilisation, de-democratising tendencies emerge in response to democratising or innovative tendencies. These are most

¹ <https://pulsmedycyny.pl/wyksztalczenie-i-zaangazowanie-w-zycie-towarzyskie-pomagaja-chronic-przed-demencja-badanie-1158027> (accessed on: 13.12.2023).

often movements fighting to maintain the traditional family model with strong parental authority, fighting against technological progress, extreme religious or political movements. Anti-intellectual protest movements or populist movements protesting against scientific action can be interpreted in these terms. All of them, according to Elias' theory, have a role in the process of civilisation.

An important question is what happens when we acquire critical awareness in the learning process. According to Elias, this allows one to achieve a sense of happiness or freedom in harmony between social obligations, demands and personal needs and inclinations, at most (Elias 2011: 590). However, according to Elias, liberation from social pressures is not possible as long as the process of civilisation continues.

Recalling the transformations of the knowledge-based society mentioned in the first part of the text, it can be seen that the civilisation process is progressing, intertwining the processes of civilisation and de-civilisation. The social accessibility and universality of learning constitutes, on the one hand, a method of reducing the distance between individuals and social classes, but on the other hand a field of social discipline.

Conclusion

My attempt to interpret the process of learning as a civilisational phenomenon at the same time constitutes an attempt to take a pedagogical look at a thriving, one of the more interesting, in my opinion, trends in contemporary sociology (*cf.* Suwada 2011; Bucholc 2013, Bucholc 2023a; 2023b), which can be inspiring for pedagogy. My work is a pedagogical reading, which means that I use the categories of general pedagogy for interpreting Elias in an attempt to adapt the theory of the process of civilisation to the needs of my discipline. This is certainly not a new approach in pedagogy, it has been done before by Lech Witkowski (2013), interpreting the paradigm of duality in Elias. In my reading, Elias' theory allows us to understand the change that the learning process is subject to. It occupies, as I mentioned earlier, a special place in the Eliasian perspective. Being an immanent element of the process of civilisation, it is not itself interpreted through this process. Meanwhile, learning permeates the process of civilisation, itself being a field of that process. By analysing the transformation of the learning process from didacticism, by gradually giving the individual responsibility for his or her own learning process, we can observe a modelling towards the individual being responsible for his or her own learning process. This is an inspiring perspective to reconstruct the discourses that are part of the learning management process, linking Elias' theory to the extensive tradition of pedagogical readings of critical theory, for example interpretations of Michel Foucault's views and analyses of the knowledge society.

In conclusion, I owe an explanation. I decided to submit a text on learning in an Eliasian perspective to the issue of *Ars Educandi* dedicated to Tomasz Szkudlarek, despite the fact that it does not deal *strictly* with the category of learning, because it is an experimental text for me, which is also a new field of research and interpretation in my work. Certainly, one of the things I have learned from Tomasz Szkudlarek is not to be afraid to experiment with theory. We have stated on numerous occasions that even unexpected combinations and borrowings can bring interesting and, above all, contributing solutions to our understanding of the world. I remain with this belief.

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Summary

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An attempt at a pedagogical reading of selected threads
of Norbert Elias' theory*

The purpose of this article is to theorize the category of learning in light of the theory of N. Elias. In the first part, I interpret learning as a social process shaped by civilization, in which civilization and de-civilization tendencies are intertwined, including those related to moral panics concerning learning. In the next, I analyse the process of shaping the learner in a civilizational process that assumes gradual restraint of affect and anxiety as a disciplinary factor. The final part consists in a conclusion, summarizing the described analysis.

Keywords

learning, Norbert Elias, pedagogy, civilization