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Report of the Three-day Lectures with Professor Gert Biesta on His Book *The Beautiful Risk of Education*

Between the period of March 1st–3rd, at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Gdansk, lectures by Professor Gert Biesta were held, devoted to the publication of *The beautiful risk of education* (2013).

A key aspect to which the Professor drew our attention was the exploration of the fundamental „weakness” (openness) of education in response to attempts to make education „work”, to make it strong, secure and risk-free, to turn it into a predictable machine for the production of pre-specified and measurable „learning outcomes”.

The first part of the lecture was concerned with ongoing „panic” about education driven by the fear of being left behind. But Biesta cited the words of Philippe Meirieu, who stated that the desire to „fix” education is an infantile desire because it denies the reality of education.

The next issue concerned the double history of school, where the Professor pointed to the fact that school is „a servant of two masters” – the society and the children. School has to have a „place to breathe”, it has to become a place shielded from the expectations of society. To do that, good educators must:

- know how to „serve” both masters;
- know how to keep the two agendas in balance;
- know that a choice ‘for the child’ is not a choice against society.

The most important thing, the ultimate task is to encourage children to want to be in the world in a mature way. But how do we restore balance? What should the school stand for? The answer that the Professor gave us concerned three issues:

1. learning – the point of education is not that children/students learn, but that they learn something, that they learn for a reason and that they learn it from someone; but education raises questions about content, purpose and relationships; the most important is the question about purpose/direction;



Diagram 1. Three functions of education and three domains of educational purpose

Source: The diagram is by Professor Biesta, which was presented during lectures with Professor Gert Biesta on his book *The beautiful risk of education*.

2. development – finding the right talents and the right potential and pursuing the right development – but the question is what is right? We can look at that issue in two ways:
 - A. „I will tell you!” – the teacher says what is the best for the student – moralizing/authoritarian education – it changes students into objects;
 - B. the risky work of education:
 - a. the task – what is an educational task – to enable grown-up existence;
 - b. the question – what is an educational question – is what I desire desirable? – this is the question that interrupts; the task is not to erase or destroy our desires but to select and transform them so they can support a mature way of being in the world;
 - c. the work – what is educational work – staging the encounter with reality, working with a principle of pressure (providing space, time and forms through which we can attend to our desires), providing support and sustenance (helping students to endure the difficult encounter with what and who is different);

- d. the attention – what should we pay attention to – educational attention is focused on the non-visible (unforeseen);
 - e. the language – what is educational language – an educational way of speaking, a language that makes educational ways of seeing and doing possible;
3. formation – education as the „encounter” of a child and the world in which the child comes „into the world” – this requires giving a place to what is „out there” – a world-centered education.

The Professor finished Wednesday’s lecture by saying that educational processes are weak, they are risky encounters. That in the educational work we don’t have quick fixes or instant gratification. It is a long-term orientation that needs patience, trust, faith, hope and love. It is also risky because as educators we risk with ourselves:

- because we interrupt the life of a human being, which is an act of power;
- we hope that the students conclude that this interruption was helpful, which transforms power into authority;
- but this moment may never arrive – unauthorized acts of power.

The lecture on the second day concerned aspects of education, subjectivity and teaching. The Professor stated the idea that it ought to be possible to make a distinction between socialization and subjectification as a modern idea – that it ought to be possible to exist outside of traditions. Biesta referred to Immanuel Kant and said that rational autonomy is to think independently and critically.

Before speaking about subjectivity, Professor talked about creativity, which was the theme of chapter 1 of his book. He said that it should have been called „creation”, but the Professor did not have the courage to do it. The chapter explores what education may have to do with the coming into presence of human beings as subjects (which means not as objects, but also not as units). We talked about two creation stories – Elohim and YHWH. Elohim creates adults, YHWH prefers his creatures to remain children – this gives us two different attitudes. We can see creation as working with elements over which one has only so much control. This shows us creation as a weak force.

The question of subject – what does it mean to be a human subject? Is the subject a thing (substance) with qualities or is subject-ness an event? The first looks at the question of subject-ness in essential terms and the second looks at it in existential terms. If subjectivity is an event, there is nothing for the educator to produce. It leaves them empty-handed – there is nothing to create in the „strong” sense.

Another important aspect to which the Professor drew our attention was what is wrong with „traditional” teaching and freedom. The problem on which we are focused is that of teaching as control – authoritarian teaching. But we should think about the reconstruction of our understanding of teaching. When it comes to freedom, Biesta talked about freedom-as-sovereignty and neo-liberal freedom-as-choice. We need to know that a different notion of:

- freedom is possible (freedom as action, Arendt);
- freedom is necessary (grown-up relationship with power);
- liberation is possible.

In the traditional, authoritarian education the student can only appear as an object. Also under learning as signification students cannot appear as subjects. But our subject-ness is „opened” from the outside (being addressed, being taught).

On the last day of the lectures, we primarily focused on the issue of a hermeneutical worldview and emancipation. A hermeneutical worldview is where a human being is understood as an adaptive meaning-worker; is a universe of signification (relativism). A signification receives its sense from interlocution (Emmanuel Levinas) – it is dialogical, not ego-logical; where the other is not an object of my interpretation. In Levinas interlocution the others are not a phenomenon, but „epiphany” and he speaks to me, he addresses me and it singles me out, puts my subject-ness at stake.

The one of last things that we spoke about was the role of education in emancipation. The Professor drew two lines: from Kant, via Rousseau to progressive child-centered education and from Marx to „kritische Padagogik” and critical pedagogy. We spoke about the modern „logic” of emancipation; that it requires an intervention from the „outside” by someone whose understanding is not subjected to the workings of power. It starts with inequality in order to bring about equality – it is a political logic that is also an educational logic.

- the teacher who knows – the student who does not know;
- the teacher who explains the world to the student so that the student can become like the teacher.

We had a different look on the subject of emancipation with Paulo Freire – his alternative „logic” of educational emancipation and emancipatory education. He criticizes the „banking education” where teachers (subjects) deposit knowledge and students (only objects) are receptacles. The emancipation is from alienated existence of the oppressed and the oppressor (not from workings of power). Freire wants to overcome the teacher-student contradiction, the teacher and student both simultaneously interact as teacher-student and student-teacher.

Yet another way of looking at emancipation was made possible with Jacques Rancière and his critique of explanation (and the „explicative order”). For him to explain is to demonstrate incapacity. The question is whether it is possible to teach without explanation. The answer – everyone can teach („universal teacher”). Teaching is a relation of will to will, not a transfer of information (banking), not the encounter of a superior intelligence and an inferior intelligence. And with this, emancipation takes place when intelligence obeys only itself, even while will obeys another will. The emancipatory educations are an act of revealing an intelligence to itself.

The aim of Biesta’s lecture was to make us reflect on the current process of education, to help us to look a little different at education, show some of the problems that we had not noticed before and show that the weakness has its strength.