

Re-Connecting Love, Authority, and Mystery in Education

Love, authority and mystery are three small but powerful words. They deal with our relation to each other as human beings, to the world, and to knowledge. This way they grip some of the fundamental aspects of human growth, but nevertheless they are seldom used in discussions about pedagogy and are shun by educational theorists. An important point is thus being missed.

When rightly connected love, authority and mystery can form an essential 'pedagogical triad'; a pivot around which primary education can revolve. Together they capture the relation between teachers, students and subjects. Today, however, their previous link has withered. I lament this atrophied connection and will suggest a response: a *re-connection* between love, authority and mystery. It finds its logical place, not in a hierarchy, but in topography of pedagogical situations (much like Løvlie's 'pedagogy of place').

The discussion in this paper comes out of a study of participation in primary school classrooms where one aim has been to see how the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* is carried out in pedagogy. Throughout my observations I have seen how attention is directed and distributed - and it has puzzled me. Among many things, I have noticed that the teachers, as well as the children, long for being in touch with each other and with the pedagogical situation itself in an authentic way. The teachers invest a lot of time and attention in establishing relations with the children and caring for them (- *love?*). Yet their difficulties handling the educational relation so that the children can appear as persons with initiatives and ideas is striking (- *authority?*). I've seen the children trying to reach out; to take initiatives that stretch beyond the intimate relation to the teacher and the situation. But their efforts are met by teachers with a surprising lack of interest. It is as if teachers see children/students either as compliant learners, or as problems that need to be solved (- no *mystery?*). – The teachers hold that they want to enable student participation and initiatives, - and I believe them - but I see how they bind up the children to themselves and collect a compliant team around their teacher-ego. In this situation the child is an instrument and not a human subject in her own right.

How can one make sense of this tendency of the teachers to occupy the attention of the children and place themselves between the world and the child - instead of opening the world to them? I believe that *love, authority and mystery* may capture something of vital importance for pedagogy even though they may sound painfully romantic, outdated, and misplaced (an educationist is probably happy to finally get rid of them and at the most stick only to *authority*).

In order to make it easier for the reader to follow the line of thought, I start out by saying something regarding how the topic fits into the theme of pedagogy and then summarize the point of the paper.

How is the topic located in the theme of pedagogy?

Pedagogy is rooted in the very fact that humans meet and children are born; children are taught about the world by teachers; they live their lives in the world, and they die. Pedagogy is, as Løvlie points out, “basically earthbound, territorial and local – as an intentional activity it quite literally takes place somewhere: primarily in the home, and in our kindergartens, schools and universities” (Løvlie 2007, p 32): All teaching requires a setting and all learning is bound to situations and to the places where experiences come into being and leave their traces. On a similar note Hannah Arendt states that “the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings are *born* into the world” (Arendt 1993, p 174).

Why is it then today so difficult to speak of pedagogy in a way that embraces these fundamental aspects of human life? Could it be that the essentials of pedagogy were previously held together by faith and hierarchy, and that in a rationalized scientific discourse they are dislocated and lost and their connection simply atrophies?

This paper is an attempt to show how love, authority and mystery contribute to pedagogical *topoi*. (*Topoi* is that which one, within a discourse and concerning a specific topic, consider relevant, implicit, possible and worth saying.) I have tried and ‘tasted’ the words for a long time: First *love*, then *authority*. However, not until I grasped the possibilities of the term *mystery* did I become convinced that there is a point in bringing them (back) together: Together they can illustrate a pedagogically appropriate meaning where life, non-instrumental knowledge and personal relations still have a rightful place.

The arguments are presented in the following steps:

- I. *Love, authority and mystery* are three terms that capture some of the essentials of pedagogy. When *connected* they deal with the relation between humans (teachers & children), the world, and knowledge.
- II. Eventually these words have become uncomfortable and shunned in the scientific educational discourses. But I will indicate that there is something to lament, namely the *atrophy of the connections*.
- III. The atrophied connection between authority and love tends to a tendency to *formalism* and *corrupt passion*. And without connection to mystery the tendency is reinforced by *hubris*.
- IV. The response suggested is a *re-connection*. An appropriate reconnection between authority, love and mystery, finds its logical place, not in hierarchy, but in topography of pedagogical situations.

What is Love?

Love needs reality (Simone Weil 2005, p 292)

What do we mean by 'love', and why is it that we seldom join love to education and schooling? Today we hardly ever speak of love in direct connection to the pedagogical situation. Perhaps it has to do with the thought of love as reducible either to sexuality or to power - or to something else less suitable for learning. Even in a progressive understanding love is dismissed as too private and weak to qualify as a concept in modern didactics.

Love is a complicated metaphor. It deals with our most inner and private feelings, but it also has a public, perhaps even universal dimension in its relation to Good, and sometimes in its relation to what some call God (which is slightly another issue and not included in this discussion).

Among many philosophers love has been studied as attachment and affection, and philosophy is held to be 'the love of wisdom'. The criteria for whether something is *really love*, according to Raimond Gaita (2002, p 233), centre on a deeper set of critical concepts of which goodness, lucidity and purity are pre-eminent. Though, among some thinkers love is simply considered to be "male ideology for securing female subordination" (Honderich 2005, p 546).

We can see how, on one hand, love refers to freedom and the good, and on the other hand love refers to degradation, bonds and fear. St Augustine differs between forms of love, *cupiditas* and *caritas*: *Cupiditas* is "that which I seek outside of myself, a process where I can become a slave of belonging to that which is outside of me, that which I am not, that which is unattainable. There can be no freedom in that relation, only fear." Living in *cupiditas* man "belongs to the world and is estranged from himself" whereas *caritas* is free "because it casts out fear" (cited in Arendt 1996, p 23).

I find the description that Iris Murdoch makes uplifting:

Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partly refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that join us to Good and join us to the world through Good. (Murdoch 2001, p 100)

So understood, love can be part of the 'architecture' of education; one of the fundamentals for education to pivot on.

What is Authority (not)?

Authority is about power in human relations, it is not the same as domination. Authority can be convincing and, in some cases, true and authentic. It can also be persuasive, but in education, and in particular for the children, this kind of authority is problematic because persuasive authority does not listen.

Authority tends to appear in predictions, and authority is sometimes seen in a limited sense as something one gains as a consequence of being right: Teachers have authority given in their position as teachers. This is sometimes mistakenly thought to be because they know more and have more power. But Arendt (1993) twists the meaning of authority: For her, authority is something that teachers *take*, a kind of loving responsibility: the teachers' responsibility for the world has this specific form of authority in schools. This means that the teacher should see herself as a representative of the world in relation to the children. The teacher takes responsibility for the world – even though s/he has not created it.

So understood, for the teacher authority is to position oneself in the pedagogical territory.

The secrecy of Mystery

What, then, is *mystery*, the third avoided essential of pedagogy?

Mystery can mean ineffable, but it can also simply indicate confusion. Mystery can be close to secrecy, or it can signify a mysterious ineffable realm. But mystery can also be understood the way Gabriel Marcel does, namely as something that involves us and impinge on who we are. With him a mystery can be something in which we are engaged in as the ones we are – differently from problems that are put in our way.

Whereas *love* is a more or less known but complicated issue in the private life of educational researchers, and *authority* is an ever contested concept, *mystery* is for many the very reason why they got into science, and not metaphysics, in the first place. Perhaps mystery is then identified with 'mysticism' which is related to religious experience. To reject the idea of mystery is to say that there is no thing or process etc that we cannot reach with our (human) concepts. In line with this that which 'seems to be mystery' is only unclear. The realm of the unclear is not yet known, and it is expected to diminish along with the progress of science where each important step reveals the truth beyond mysteries. In Darwin's day some thinkers saw in Darwin's theory a way to account for that 'mystery of mysteries', the regular appearance of new species by means of natural, or as they might have said, 'intermediate' causes (Lennox 2004).

David E. Cooper digs deep into the vocabulary of mystery and says that "to talk about mystery is impossible to describe what cannot be described, whereas to talk 'about' is to say something in connection with it that may not be similarly impossible" (Cooper 2002, p 286). But he establishes an important connection between mystery and humility as he keeps the door open for an understanding of humility as something more than a virtue. And he holds that humility, like hubris, can come in two modes: humility of belief or humility of posture. The latter is, I would argue, highly relevant in the pedagogical situation. Coopers thesis is that humility has two discernible components: respect for the integrity of things and "what Murdoch calls 'unselfing' – namely the abandonment of hubristic claims on behalf of human beings capacities to, inter alia, know how things are, plan and control the future, and 'dominate the world'" (Cooper 2002,p 360-361).

Mystery – combined with humility - reminds us that life is an enigma and hard to comprehend. From the viewpoint of education its importance lies in the prospect that children may be beyond our full understanding, but still they need not be understood as problems to be solved.

CONNECTIONS AND RE-CONNECTIONS

In education “authority” has had an unpleasant ring as it has been connected with domination and force – and at its best with patronizing. A teacher can use his/her authority to be a seducer who makes himself/herself interesting: He/she can make him/herself the object: “The seducer feeds on his followers and disciples. He ties all mental activity (any activity, really) to his own person” (Hyldgaard 2006, p 147). The seducing teacher is badgering, not convincing.

But if we look at authority in education the way Arendt (1993) describes it then educators’ responsibility for the world takes *a specific form of authority* in the classroom: In order to get this special form, however, it needs to be connected with love. Authority has an important impact on the relation between teachers and children because love includes the world in this relation: To love the world is to accept the world, and to love the children is to accept them and to refrain from wanting to change them- and refraining from wanting to prepare them for changing the world in a particular and predefined way.

Without the connection between love and authority education can only (re)produce uniformity. Rejuvenation and unpredictability cannot come by demand; newness is brought in by ‘the new and young’ given that the educator has taken the step to agree to authority. Arendt uses a deep metaphor to make her point: *love*. Love is not to be understood as an eternal power that carries education beyond its critical point and fills education; it should here not to be taken to be empathy either. Love is love of the world and the decision to take responsibility for the world is an act of love that enables newness.

I bring in the term *mystery* not in order to state a position about what may or may not be discursive or effable, but just to make the simple point that much may be unknown or even mysterious about children and about the world in the pedagogical situation, and that this is quite in order. (Who wants to be taught something that is already completely illuminated and perfectly simple and clear?) *Mystery* is thus not a final statement but rather an attitude towards a quality in pedagogy; it can work as a reminder that not everything needs to be known or illuminated, and that teaching and learning can go on without breaking the child’s integrity.

Without the connection between *love* and *authority* children cannot flourish as children, because teachers stand between the children and the world, and an atomistic and egocentric perspective is maintained. Without including *mystery* in the reconnection we risk suggesting just another hopelessly suffocating pedagogical perspective. Recognizing *mystery*

in education is important because it may awaken humility and allow children to *be* human subjects in their own right.

WHAT IS THERE TO LAMENT?

In the contemporary pedagogical *topoi* authority, love and mystery are shunned. Why is this something to grieve over? Let me bring up some indications:

The possibility of pedagogy is its “places of experience” (Løvlie 2007). The teachers’ prospects of engaging and acting in the pedagogical situation are today highly restricted. The pedagogical territory is more or less invaded by a vocabulary that has introduced a discipline and formalism in schools which is not based on the (authentic) authority of the teacher and a common solidarity. Løvlie mourns this loss of personal relations:

This condition is the *topos* or topic from where we should reclaim for pedagogy the territory of discourse that has, over the past decades, been seized by the contemporary management vocabulary. The politics of that vocabulary has introduced a different discipline and formalism in our schools, not based on the authority of the teacher and a common solidarity, but on abstract steering mechanisms and systems of impersonal rules that, for all practical purposes, tends to sap personal relationships of their vital energy. (Løvlie 2007, pp 32-33)

In addition to this I cry over the lack of pedagogical interest in the unpredictable and the not (yet?) known, mainly because this is where the ‘arendtian’ possibilities for newness and change are lost. Let me illustrate it with the help of notes I made in one of the ‘pedagogical places where experiences’ are made, a primary school classroom:

“How do you FEEL about the news?”

During a lesson about news in the daily papers, a girl eagerly presents her story. It is about some children who found a raft on the shore and floated away with it – but returned safely just in time before the rescue operation with firemen and police arrived. The girl seemingly enjoys the story. Everybody listens attentively as she tells. When she’s finished the teacher immediately asks her how she feels about it. The girl does not answer, but looks straight into the eyes of the teacher. The teacher then presses her: “What do you feel?” No answer. The teacher now insists: “HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS???” The girl remains quiet. She lowers her eyes, shrinks up (In my eyes it is as if she gradually disappears from the communicative space.)

The lesson continues. The teacher asks: “Are there any other news today?”

(Notes from classroom observations, 2008)

We could conclude that this girl obstructs by not answering the teacher’s question. However, this girl, like so many other young students in schools, have during my observations shown the difficulties they are placed in when on the one hand, they are expected to bring in news and new knowledge, and on the other hand are expected to stay

exactly within the given limits of the situation. The teachers demand attention and compliance on the expense of creativity and newness.

This glimpse of the life in a classroom may serve as an example of what happens when the connection between authority and love is weakened and lost, and another tendency takes over.

What there is to lament is not the loss of each term, separately, but the *atrophy of the connections* between 'authority, love and mystery'. They are no longer part of the *topoi* of pedagogy (if they ever were), and problematic tendencies take over.

WHICH TENDENCIES TEND TO TAKE OVER?

I have indicated that without the connection between authority and love children cannot flourish as children when teachers stand between the children and the world. What summarizes the situation to which these tendencies tend is, in one word, *formalism*.

In education it is a formalism that "canonizes knowledge and skills and their measurement; it is formalism that congeals in didactic schemes of content and method that has /.../ left pedagogy without a voice. What we have is the abstract form, abstract in the literal sense of intangible, disengaged and strangely isolated from the complex interactions of the classroom. (Løvlie 2007, p 33)

Formalism is the name of the tendency where the world, humans and knowledge are kept apart and the only relations that can be constituted between them are hierarchical ones. But differently from the game 'rocks, scissors and bags' where no one wins over them all, the egocentric formalist maintains her or his right to decide who is on top of the hierarchy. A formal garden is carefully designed and kept according to a plan, and it is not allowed to grow naturally. Likewise a formal pedagogical situation is a closed situation which is tightly kept according to a plan where nothing can grow 'naturally', which means that nothing can come about without passing through the teacher first. Another problem with the 'new formalism' is that, with its didactic schemes and closed practices, it turns compliance and control into the main issues of pedagogy.

A counterpart to the formalism is *corrupt passion*: It arises when love stands alone. It is exemplified by Hyldgaard's 'seducer' who binds up the attention of the child through a constant urging for love.

The third essential, mystery, is a reply to the idea that everything should be illuminated and controlled and expected to be 'knowable' and measurable. The short step from measure to power leads to an overwhelming belief in the importance of the teacher. Teacher *hubris* may be reinforced by certain ideas about the relation between knowledge about the child and his/her actions and accomplishments, or it may be *hubris* in the sense where knowledge and power become one.

I think that the latter kind of *hubris* is found in the powerful discourse of rankings and points as a means to determine the value of scientific efforts and works: Suddenly 'good science' is all about being on the right lists and points, referred to by the right others - and this tendency is taking over in schools too. I question the established belief that schools should respond to the ideal that everything can and ought to be measured.

There are several reasons why these tendencies - formalism, corrupt passion and hubris - should not be at the heart of the pedagogical situation.

WHAT COULD BE AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE?

The response to the lament that I find in Arendt (1993) demands a connection between love and authority: "Now school is by no means the world and must not pretend to be" (Arendt 1993, p 188). Educators stand in relation to the young as "representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it and even thought they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is", she continues (p 189). Her point, as I understand it, is that the teacher should love the world, not the children. An implication of her argument is that the task of the teacher is to show the world to the children, not to translate it or explain it, but also not to change or explicate the children.

With Arendt's connection between authority and love, *the child may remain a mystery to us*: It is not within the scope of teachers work to enter the region of the child or anticipate its future. The teacher's task is to show the world to the children – not to direct them to their own egos (nor towards the ego of the teacher). Gaita gives his version of a similar position:

Just as genuine charity must be motivated by the needs of another rather than by the desire to do something charitable, so teachers inspire their children into proper love of what they are doing by the manner of their attention to their subject rather than by setting out to inspire them. (Gaita 2002, pp 231-232)

The response I suggest is a topographic re-connection. There is no point in crying for the past and responding to the lament by re-establishing hierarchical and patronizing connections. I'm not suggesting an exchange of measure settings; recognizing mystery as part of the pedagogical triad – the pivot- would allow children to be subjects in their own right and authors of their own lives where they are respected for being *who* they are, in the arendtian sense:

The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. /... / in other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely its actor and its sufferer, but nobody is its author. (Arendt 1998, p 184)

Murdoch (2001, p 74) underlines that “there can be no substitute for pure, disciplined, professional speculation; and it is from these two areas, art and ethics, that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science.” For such speculation in education the concepts authority, love and mystery can be useful. And in combination with a topographic turn this can free pedagogy from its imprisonment in flat and dry, disengaged formalism. Not only give pedagogy a voice, but also put it back in touch with the world and widen its ‘places of experience’: “the places where experiences come into being and leave their traces” (Løvlie 2007, p 32).

Løvlie suggests that we “reclaim the territory of pedagogy”. A step in that direction is, so I argue, taken by an appropriate reconnection between love, authority and mystery. It finds its logical place - not in hierarchy but - in topography of pedagogical situations.

Concluding remarks

Authority, mystery and love are three small but powerful words. In a pedagogical context they can express some of the fundamentals of pedagogy. That is why I have chosen to call them ‘essentials’. An essential is a basic thing you cannot live without. An ‘essential of pedagogy’ is thus a necessity without which children cannot flourish as children. In the topography of pedagogy these essentials are not things or emotions supplied or mediated by the teacher to the child. Instead, love, authority and mystery can form a ‘pedagogical triad’; a pivot around which primary education can revolve.

I have tried to argue that there are several reasons to bring them back into educational discourse. Within a topological territory the pedagogical relation between children and teachers includes authority, love, knowledge and the world. It is, however, of great importance *how* these qualities and aspects are brought together and how their relations are conceived of if they are to be located within ‘pedagogy of place’. If, for instance, a child is spoken of and understood as stupid or daft, a pedagogical point is missed. But if the prospect that a child may know (something) is accepted, then mystery and enigma are also included as a possibility in the pedagogical relation. With that curiosity and interest in life and in others, even the otherness of young children, may be kept alive.

The things I love are creatures. They were born by chance. My meeting with them was also by chance. They will die. What they think, do and say is limited and is a mixture of good and evil. I have to know this with all my heart and not love them the less. (Weil 2005, p 297)

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