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The Cruel Optimism of Education and Education's Implication with "Passing-On"

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Situating her analytics of “cruel optimism” in the early part of her book Lauren Berlant explains that “I am seeking out the conditions under which certain attachments to what counts as life come to make sense or no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings” (2011, p.13). In what follows I want to loosely draw on Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism” to help me to identify and untangle how the prevailing sense of “optimism” in education works against our common hope or collective striving for what is educational in education. I discuss how the “cruel optimism” that invites people to constantly innovate and improve themselves through learning (and ever more learning) leads ultimately to a sense of “presentism” and “privation,” which comes to threaten the role that education plays (or should play) in sustaining and forging a common world. Proposing that education is where the concern with “passing-on” (in all senses of the word) properly takes place I discuss how education can tend to and pine towards something larger and more durable (the world) than the individual acquisition of knowledge and skills that serve immediate transient interests. In this sense, I seek to gesture to the possibility of hope within what is inherently educational, to a sensibility and affirmation for “passing-on” that might help us address the cruel depravity and isolation affecting a time immersed in the “learnification of education” (Biesta, 2013; 2012; 2005).

There is a “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011) in education that drives us to constantly work at improving ourselves. We often undergo an education with the confidence that it will secure our success in a future good life. Education seems inextricably bundled up with this elusive drive of bettering ourselves; it offers incitements and exhortations of limitless possibilities to manage and mortgage our own
success. The discourse of “life-long learning,” for example, is peddled under the guise that amidst today’s constantly changing circumstances, individuals, in order to succeed, need to learn how to constantly learn. Emphasizing learning as a transposable mode that can meet any situation promises that education will allow us to adapt to (and survive) an ever volatile and menacing market. The cruel paradox here is that under “late capitalism” this optimism in education quite literally indebts us to an impossible normative narrative of success. All such optimistic gesticulations and solicitations ultimately wear us down and lock us down, as it were, within the *privative* sense that it’s all up to the individual to innovate and improve and to keep innovating and improving oneself through an education. Putting the burden of such optimism on the individual, consequently, alienates and isolates one from what it might mean to hold a world in common.

Caught in the endless pursuit of self-improvement and of managing oneself for success through an education, we admittedly end up losing not only something of ourselves, but, also, something worldly and fundamental about education itself. The cruel irony here is that this optimism in education ends up usurping what is educational in education. Today’s optimism in education, with its emphasis on “answering everything there is to say about education in terms of individual learners” and how processes of learning can secure personal success, leads us to what Gert Biesta describes as the “learnification of education” (2005) This “ugly term,” according to Biesta, signals a time when “the language of learning makes it difficult if not impossible” to speak about the substantive purposes of education (2012, p.584), and the role that education plays (or should play) in tending to and forging a common world. The problem, as Biesta varyingly points out, is that “learning” basically emphasizes the individual in isolation and also
accents instrumental self-serving methods over existential and interpretative world-building approaches.

In this hyper-individualized atmosphere, what is lost is how education is educational precisely because it always implies the “beautiful risk” of human interaction, the relational encounter where human beings come together to influence each other with words and interpretations that work to forging and sustain a common world. While the world was there before us and most likely will outlast us, its significance wears down and is in need of repair and renewal through the words and interpretations that we fashion through an education. Education, at a very basic level, strives to assure the continuation of a common world, “passing on” from generation to generation an interpretative repertoire that can sustain and expand our sense of belonging to a world of significance. As Maxine Greene once put it, “what we think of as the common world [has] come into view over time by means of the understanding that has developed and the interpretations that have been devised… the growth of understanding is linked to the bringing into being of a common world” (1982, p. 7). By virtue of “passing on” and giving on to others, what in first place has itself been received, education seems to offer a place for a type of “organized remembrance” or “inheritance” (Peperzak, 2012, pp. 58-59). However, the remembrance and inheritance housed in education is never consolidated or finally stored away, rather remembrance and inheritance becomes educational precisely when it partakes in the proliferating practice of maintaining, restating and re-signifying itself in a different context. In other words, given that the process of transmission (paradosis, traditio) is enacted through language what is “passed on” through education is necessarily open to contest of interpretation, recitations and transformation: hence, to
iteration. In this sense, what is educational in education involves engaging the past and
the present with something more than itself, with something hopeful, with a trans-
generational beyond that implicates our time with the fact that it must “pass on” rather
than merely repeat (the same).

Our present must “pass on” (in all senses of the word); that is, our present must
inherit the past (as something readable and transformable) to pass it on, and, at the same
time, prepare for its own passing, in which it itself is handed over to the unpredictable
birth of another. Education as a place, perhaps the place, chiefly vested and concerned
with “passing on” does not (thankfully) strive to teach us how to live (finally) or, even,
how to die (finally). Rather as an exemplar of a place of “passing-on” education invites
us to affirm the “living-on” of the question of what it might mean to live together, to
forge, sustain and pledge something of significance in common (and across generations)
amidst what is constantly passing away, against the ruin of time. Drawing on Jacques
Derrida’s notion of “survival” we could say that education, concerned as it is with the
possibility of “passing on” (with the paradosis of the variegated traces, remains, latent
aspirations, visions, iterable legacies of another time and for another time) gives us a
chance to affirm the idea of our world and our love for the world as surviving, as “living-
after-death” in excess of death (2007, p. 6). Education, as a place where we become
concerned with what it means to “pass on,” seems to bring us together in a peculiar type
of hopeful affiliation that, borrowing from Derrida again, is forged on the “anterior
affirmation of being-together in allocution” (1997, p. 249). That is, an affiliation forged
not through familiarity or will but through difference and acceptance, across different
times, before and after my time, where each generation stands to each other apart but still
“charged” with maintaining the hope of a common world to pass-on. It is the charge of ensuring that the world might “live-on” that forges an affiliation that is “infinitely larger and more powerful” than any one present.

However, our “present optimism” in education, driven as it is by the sense of “learnification,” knows not how to think of the “educational” as something that necessarily points beyond the present to something more. The cruelty of our present educational optimism, I want to suggest, is precisely cruel because it is not hopeful; it is cruel because it self-encloses education in the fears and delimitations of a present that has no sense of its implication with the larger significance of affirming our “passing on.” That is, education gets locked into and becomes exclusively defined by the present short-term impulse to acquire qualifications, knowledge and skills that would allow the individual “to make it” in the fierce atmosphere of today’s job market. The fleeting, privative and self-serving optimism of our time renders education temporally insignificant and ultimately alienated from a sense of having anything to do with sustaining something larger and more durable than our immediate interests. Education thought of as simply the pursuit of qualification (as the acquisition of knowledge and skills that would render one measurably competent to perform a specific task) does not tend to the world, but rather serves the short, transient lifespan of the optimistic job seeker.

Education as an optimistic pursuit for “self-betterment” gets caught up and primarily defined as a “process” that vows to equip individuals with the skills for adapting to the cyclical activity of sustaining our sheer “survival” and “life.” The prevalent sense of learning, motored as it is by the optimism of creating individuals that
can be evermore flexible and efficient, who can ceaselessly adapt and innovate to the needs of life under “late capitalism,” risks completely occluding public and durable questions regarding what education might or should be for. Instead of asking after “who are we” and “who will we become” through an education, we end up with a purposeless notion of the learner as a perpetual opportunist. In this sense, we relinquish the presumption that education, or a person undergoing an education, should be wedded to any long-term common undertakings, even to the myths of national progress or societal development. We seem to be long past a time when education could be thought as having something to do with even these illusory “common” trans-generational aspirations. Today’s optimism in undergoing an education seems to exclusively serve the interest of securing individual success; such a cruel optimism in education symptomatically reflects, “the strategies of survival and adjustment we have developed for living in the present” (Berlant, 2011, p.49).

Countering the cruel educational optimism of our time involves us in being able to break out of the trappings of presentism; to this end, we need to consider that what is educational in education has ultimately to do with that which, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “transcends the lifespan of mortal men” (1998, pp.52-58). Continuing to evoke Arendt (although she is speaking about the public realm), we need to consider that what is truly educational in education involves a concern and reckoning with “immortality” (1998, p.55). There is nothing theological or otherworldly about this claim. Education is concerned with the immortal since education is a means in which the world ensures its continuity, in which “things are saved from the destruction of time” (1998, p.57). If education is to have any meaning it cannot simply be erected for one generation and only
of concern for the optimism and short-term interests of those presently living. What is educational must outlast and exceed our own lifespan and reach into the past and future alike, since it involves tending to something that was there before we came into the world and something that will presumably outlast our brief appearance in it (Arendt, 1998, pp.52-57). While ultimately nothing human will be able to withstand the ruin and wearing down of time, education provides a place where we can maintain and give shelter to something that sustains the hope and affirmation of “living-on” with significance: it is a place that shelters a repertoire of common visions and aspirations that can be brought into meaningful configurations culled from the meaningful patterns of the past to help us tend, mend and repair what wears down.

Linking education and immortality, with that which spans beyond any one lifespan or any one-generation, allows us to tap into something hopeful rather than what is fleetingly optimistic. A sense of hope arises for us when we consider that what we might build and tend to through an education is not merely confined to our own short lifespan, but surpasses our transient existence and can become part of a larger world. Thinking of education in this way, tending to the educational as that which lies beyond the optimism of my own lone success helps, it would seem, to guard against the fleetingness and meaninglessness of individual life. What is educational in education exceeds “my time” and helps to give meaning and hope to a person’s existence beyond the perishable and temporally insignificant ego. What is educational in education thus helps us to “pass on.” In other words, what is educational in education initiates us into a common world that uniquely and singularly involves me, charges me, but thankfully is more than me.
Because this sense of education points beyond my needs and my short-term interests it saves me from the cruel depravity of isolation and offers me the hope of being part of a world. This involves the ways in which education contributes to the formation of a certain sense and sensibility for a person to “become-singular-plural,” that is, for a person to become uniquely-singularly-charged in relationship to others and the world: an affiliation forged by our “being-together in allocation” (Derrida, 1997, p. 249). In contrast to cultivating flexible and efficient skills that feed the optimistic privative drive for success, education here has to do with the allotment of a time and place where the singularity, irreplaceability and particularity of each person can emerge through being in a responsive relationship to others and the world. To be clear the sense of singularity that is prioritized here emerges not from simply acquiring skills or even cultivating virtues, but by becoming responsible (becoming “charged” in “allocation”) to the call of the other and to the world that the other opens for me. Education, in this sense, is the place and time where we can sense our exposure to the other and to a world that charges me and calls me out in a singular way beyond my own duration in myself: calls me out to attend to what is at risk of being lost, to what needs my tending, mending and time. Education thus invites us to become existentially unique through our attempt to respond, to turn towards and care for the world that it introduces us to, a world that is precarious, that wears down and is in need of repair and renewal, as Arendt would say (1993).

In contrast to feeding the “cruel optimism” of our time, to recover the educational in education is to reconfigure the hope embedded in what transcends the lifespan and understandings of any one-generation. At issue is thinking of education not simply as the passing on of bits of knowledge and skills that serve the fleetingness of my time and my
optimism, but as the work of inheriting and “passing on” the world. In this sense, and invoking the work of Roger Simon (2014; 2005), education would thoroughly inflect my time with a sense of responsibility: a responsibility that uniquely falls upon my time for 1) guarding and reiterating the traces of those no longer here and who hand us (paradosis, traditio) a world, and for 2) preserving a place-to-come for those not yet present (not yet born) who will one day receive the world we tended. Drawing on Derrida’s words to further press this sentiment we could say that no education that is educational “seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born…” (1994, p. xix).

References


