

Momentary Events: A Faithful (Educational) Concern for the 'Here and Now'

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Toward a Weak Ontology of/for Education: A Symposium

Chair: Anne Phelan (UBC)

Discussant: Gunnlaugur Magnússon (Uppsala University)

This symposium was provoked by and constitutes a response to Emile Bojesen's critique of the humanist legacy in education.

In his book, *Forms of Education: Rethinking Educational Experience Against and Outside the Humanist Legacy*, Bojesen (2020) argues that in embracing humanism's values of rectitude (i.e. self-sufficiency; autonomy; rationality) and redemption (i.e. moral and intellectual improvement; harmonization of the individual and the social order), as foundational, education (as in schooling) becomes nothing more than an means to "social hygiene and economic productivity" (p. 45). He makes a compelling case for a broader understanding of education as "a multitude of experience which are perceived and interpreted – in the service of the perpetual formation (and deformation) of non-stable subjects" (p. 5). While sympathetic to Bojesen's perspective, it does beg the following questions: If all experience is educational, what differentiates education from life? Are there any specifically *educational* commitments that can guide educators who wish to abandon the humanist legacy? Without recourse to some 'foundation,' are educators not left with the problem of adequately justifying our values and practices? The author offers a rich repertoire of concepts that begin to affirm *educational* experience – 'passive education' connoting 'restrained' or 'non-impositional' relations between individuals who 'let the other be' (p. 106); and, 'conversation' envisioned as the 'fluid movement of thought' among speakers (p. 114) being two examples. In doing so, Bojesen's work takes an unexpected ontological turn and it is this turn that the papers in this symposium wish to examine and extend.

Embracing Bojesen's concerns and inspired by Stephen White's (2000) assertion that it is possible to develop 'positive' or 'affirmative' accounts of life without abandoning a critique of foundationalism, we wish to propose 'a weak ontology' of education. An ontological turn implies a greater awareness and interrogation of taken-for-granted conceptions – of education and the educated person – in the modern West. What distinguishes this 'weak' characterization of education from a 'strong' version, is that it enables us to articulate some educational commitments while appreciating that the latter are contestable and contingent; they cannot be "fully disentangled from an interpretation of present historical circumstances" (p. 10-11). Significantly, however, these commitments a) are key to how we articulate the meaning of our lives, individually and collectively; b) are intertwined with questions of identity and history; and c) offer parameters within which to think 'education' and its relation to the human subject.

Set against present circumstances – a neoliberal preoccupation with progress, hyper-individualism, and performativity – symposium papers identify and explore three ontological commitments: 1) the '*event*', that the unexpected occurs in life and human subjects have a capacity for radical novelty; 2) '*inclination*', that the existence of others summons ethical and political responsibility in each of us; and 3) '*conversation*', that humans subjects are distinct and in need of making ourselves understood and this requires relentless, collective engagement. Each commitment is borne of an existential reality but with historical dimension. A weak ontology of/for education hinges on these realities and schooling becomes one site of their contingent negotiation. Therefore, what it means to be human and to be educated are always in play; they are, in Biesta's (2006) terms, "radically open question[s]" (p. 4, 5).

In summary, each paper presentation engages Bojesen's (2021) critique of the humanist legacy while attempting to affirm and sustain *educational* formulations. Respectively, presenters (from Australia, Canada, Denmark, England and Scotland) draw upon ontological sources – the event (Badiou), inclination (Cavarero), and conversation (Blanchot) – examining their value for rethinking education in our time. The session concludes with a commentary by Discussant, Dr. Gunnlaugur Magnússon, Uppsala University.

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Presentations of the Symposium

Papers in Symposium: 3

National Perspectives: 5

Momentary Events: A Faithful (Educational) Concern for the 'Here and Now'

Dion Rüsselbæk Hansen (University of Southern Denmark), **Anne Phelan** (University of British Columbia)

National perspective: Denmark and Canada

Worldwide, schooling has for decades been criticized for its Enlightenment heritage and how it links education to a rationalistic logic of progress (Korsgaard, 2024). Much of what goes on in schools is – as a result of this logic – pre-determined, planned and measured against certain objective standards. The upshot is that school as a form of education reflects the ordinary and everyday realm (Badiou, 2001) and has become largely a matter of socialization and qualification (Biesta, 2020). As such, students' experience is confined to taken-for-granted understandings about themselves (i.e. seemingly coherent identities), the world (i.e. rule-based order) and the meaning of life (i.e. pursuit of personal interests such as individual success) (Ruti, 2012). Following Bojesen (2020) this is one of the reasons why it is necessary to encourage and support teachers to create free spaces in which "plural speech between non-stable subjects" can become possible (p. 115). Against this backdrop, we posit and examine a second sphere of human existence – the extraordinary – that exists in schools but often goes unnoticed. The domain of the extraordinary is that of unexpected and disruptive events which, when they happen in education, reveal its historical and antagonistic character (Badiou, 2001), its "incompleteness or cracks" and disturbs its "taken-for-granted coordinates" (Taubman, 2010, p. 197). Being faithful to such disruption – or to the intrusion of events – has educational potential, we argue, as it can dislodge us from ordinary life, make the impossible possible and enable teachers and students to perceive and engage reality – including the different subject matters that inform their perception and engagement – in ways that can resist or suspend the above-mentioned logic of progress. Put simply, a perspective that wasn't evident becomes available. Trying to grasp the enigmatic 'truth' that is attached to the event is, we suggest, an educational process par excellence. It means that teachers and students in collaboration seek to put the different pieces together "bit by bit, by [their] fidelity to the event" (Ruti, 2012, p.

90). In such a faithful (educational) process the teacher and the students find themselves occupied in the 'here and now', studying the event without any interference from the logic of progress. In other words, they allow themselves – as un-stable subjects – to be 'captured' in space and time, in the present moment, without losing their sense of the past and future (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2017).

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From Rectitude to Inclination: Two Postural Ontologies

Matthew Clarke (University of Aberdeen)

National perspective: Scotland

Schooling in the neoliberal era relies on an ethic of competitive individualism that has been characterized as a "theology of the individual" (Sennett, 1998, p. 105). Deploying the performative resources of data and evidence, and enabled by the pervasive reach of digital technology, neoliberalism restages the time-honoured strategy of 'divide and rule,' as it pits individuals and institutions against each other through logics of competition. This competitive logic relies on an ontology of rectitude – of right-thinking and right-acting, self-sufficient and self-supporting, autonomous and responsible, individuals, standing on their own two feet – that, in turn, draws on a deep-rooted intellectual lineage: "the figure of the righteous-erect man, as a model of virtue, traverses the entire history of philosophy" (Cavarero, 2021a). In the face of this destructive individualism, our challenge as educators is to find "new ways of relating that contest the damaging structures of institutionalized individualism and neoliberal forms of individualism" (Layton, 2020, p. 71). This paper engages with this challenge by drawing on the work of Italian philosopher, Adriana Cavarero. Specifically, the paper draws on her geometries of rectitude and inclination, "two postural paradigms referring to two different models of subjectivity, two theaters for questioning the human condition in terms of autonomy or independence, two styles of thought, two languages: the first relates to individualistic ontology, the second to a relational ontology" (2016, p. 10). For educators, an ethics of rectitude seems to give license to an unforgiving form of competitive individualism that goes hand in hand with, and is exploited by, the sort of hierarchical management structures and authoritarian leadership practices experienced by many teachers in schools. By contrast, an ethics of inclination foregrounds our co-dependency and suggests "that what gives life to politics, intended in terms of an embodied democracy, is an interacting plurality that displays its ontological and relational status through the material uniqueness of resonating singular voices" (Cavarero, 2021b, p. 178). Cavarero's notion of inclination thus offers conceptual, ethical and political resources for resisting rectitude, i.e. for thinking seriously about interdependence, relationality and care, and for seeking to create ways, individually and collectively, for realising these notions within our practices and our institutions. As such, inclination is characterized by an ('weak') 'altruistic' ontology – in the sense of being ethical and in the more literal sense of being 'other'-oriented (Cavarero, 2000, p. 87) – that contrasts with the ('strong') rigid, individualistic ontology of rectitude.

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'What Comes into Our Minds?': A Conversational and Thoughtful Response to Bojesen.

Ruth Unsworth (York St. John University), **Stephen Heimans** (University of Queensland), **Dion Rüsselbæk Hansen** (University of Southern Denmark), **Matthew Clarke** (University of Aberdeen)

National perspective: Australia, Denmark, England, Scotland

This paper offers a study group's collaborative response to and a possible exemplification of Emile Bojesen's (2021) conceptualization of 'conversation' in relation to 'education'. Conversation "exceeds dialogue and dialectic" (p.114), he writes, specifically resisting development-focused forms often promoted in discourses of education. Instead, Bojesen draws on Blanchot's (1969) notion of 'plural speech' to favour a more anarchistic formulation: conversation as movement of thought through discontinuity, uncertainty and without intended outcome. This form of conversing begins from a point of uncertainty into the unknown; perhaps the 'intention', if any, is one of destabilisation, "a disestablishment of the subject and the scientific framing of research" (p.114). In exploring the potential fruitfulness and constraints of Bojesen's (2021) ideas, we look to the plurality and free association underpinning Blanchot's (1969) notion of conversation. We begin from the uncertainty of a unified response to Bojesen, and continue with what comes into our minds when engaged with issues such as the humanist legacy, (de)formation, conversation, and un-stable subjects, and what they might mean for our understandings of this thing we habitually refer to as 'education'. Process? Status? Institution? We strive to "hear what is new and different in what the author [here Bojesen] says as opposed to simply hearing what we want to hear or expect in advance" (Fink, 2007, p. 10). Such attentiveness lets us float with utterances and see what will happen when we converse and think with them. Our conversation thus takes unpredictable pathways; it is an explorative 'essai', an effort of calligraphic weaving of thoughts to grasp at an idea. Conceptualizing conversation in this way is, as Bojesen (2021) suggests, an attempt to construct 'other' spaces within existing school formations: spaces not regulated by pre-determined means and ends, but rather particular situations in which we "with our own distinct interests, and in a manner where our forms of knowledge, including our embodied knowledge, contribute to a movement of thought that does not have to be externally validated or approved" (p. 125). For it seems meaningless to speak of plurality if this is framed by a powerful dictum of usefulness and logics of growth, progress, and development. We find in Bojesen's work a strong defence of concrete situations and present moments, in which life enriching 'educational' possibilities and life-enhancing friendly relationships can emerge, 'freed' from authoritative masters and political (instrumental) restraints and released from desires for rectitude or dreams of redemption.

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