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ROUSSEAU’S INSIGHT

ABSTRACT. My comment makes a point out of Rousseau’s original insight: that education for social participation ought to start within the student’s lifeworld, and not, as in our days, with the immediate demands of modern, time-ridden consumer culture. When time is turned into a commodity and place is turned into a transit point for people constantly on the move, presence in a common lifeworld is lost. I take issue with the dominant thinking of education in terms of time and efficiency, and suggest that we start thinking of education more in terms of place and presence. I propose that modern thinkers of education – of which I mention a few here – contributed significantly to the pedagogy of place or presence. I don’t see time as a string made up of past-present-future, but rather as an expanding mental and pragmatic universe of here-and-nows. The term \textit{kairos} catches this presence as the capacity for doing the right thing at the right moment, that is, the moment when the past has prepared the ground so that the future can come as a gift. This conception is, I think, an important ground for the idea of an education for citizenship.

KEY WORDS: humanity, negative education, pedagogy of presence, Rousseau

In the most famous book ever written on education, Rousseau’s \textit{Émile}, published in 1762, the author announces what he calls “the greatest, the most important, the most useful rule of all education.” The rule is simply “not to gain time but to loose it” in education. The reader who expects to be given a straightforward principle for education, or a method to go by in her dealings with children, is duly disappointed by Rousseau’s offer. The rule seems to be a non-starter both for teachers who want to teach and for institutions that want to realise definite aims of individual discipline, ability and knowledge. Rousseau goes on to tell the teacher: Don’t persuade your student with teachings and tales of good conduct; don’t burden him with moral precepts; don’t reason with him, but “keep his soul idle for as long as possible” (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 93f.). This is the principle of so-called “negative education.” What the teacher gets is a method of non-interference, of what not to do when you want to educate. In the ears of neo-liberal educationists, who strive for efficiency and excellence in schools, such a precept sounds utterly irrelevant and even irresponsible. Common sense, too, agrees that to stand back from goal-related action in educational settings, is a waste of time. Since a waste of time is a waste of talent and money, the teacher’s passivity should be no part of education. Bad methods ought to be improved, and where there isn’t any method,
it has to be invented. Without a definite techne of planning, process and progress you end up with educational practices that do not prepare the young for the future.

Children need to be educated, and that, of course, involves methodical thinking. So where does Rousseau’s insight lead? Let me pursue what I take to be his line of thought, and let me latch on to what some educational writers have said about children’s right to partake in their own education. Rousseau talked against method in education. In The Education of Man, Friedrich Froebel, the father of the kindergarten, talks about how to be open to the world of the child. He admonishes the teacher to learn from the child and to “listen to the quiet insistence of its life, the silent demand of its mind” (Froebel, 1826/1973, p. 91). He wants parents and teachers to partake actively in the lives of children, because that brings peace and joy to adult life, and turns the adults into wiser persons. Froebel had an extraordinary sense for the tone and timbre of the child’s voice, and a deep respect for its independent rhythm in life. The feeling for the right things to do in teaching he took, not from some abstract educational precepts, but from the child’s experiential world. John Dewey added another aspect to this educational point of view, when, in Democracy and Education, he criticised the idea that education is a matter of preparing the young for the future. Education as preparation places the child, he said, on “the waiting list” for a future life that may have precious little to do with the child’s present concerns, and therefore doesn’t motivate for educational experiences. Dewey took the present situation of the child as the starting point for education. He pointed to the fact that the child is engaged with the objects that come within its range of interest and not with a distant future. To educate for the future therefore defeats its own purpose, he concludes, because it does not take advantage of the needs and possibilities of the child’s immediate present (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 68).

Dewey took issue with Froebel’s Romantic idea that the impetus for learning came from within the child itself. For him motivation comes from the immediate situation and its problems. The child and the curriculum may formally set the educational scene, but immediate concerns motivate the educational interplay that takes place on that scene. The best preparation for the future is to take the present seriously, for the future grows out of the present. Or rather: the future offers itself in the present situation by coming towards it; it convenes, as it were, on the present. What Dewey used to call aims-in-view are not future projections. It is rather the other way around. Educational aims make us receive the future into the present; they make them meet in significant encounters. Aims-in-view are, of course, about the future, but only as integrated in the person or the