

Constants of Education

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In recent years, we have been treated regularly to the so-called “Generation Barometer”, a representative study carried out with the aim of showing up changes in the pedagogical climate in Germany. In spring 2009, the barometer pointed to “profound changes in the parent–child relationship”, with children today receiving considerably more attention and encouragement than in the past, more respect as autonomous personalities, and greater freedom and latitude. Not only had the style of parenting changed, parental aims had seemingly changed as well. When parents of children under 16 were asked what their children should learn, the answer was self-worth and self-confidence first, followed by the elaboration of innate abilities, assertiveness and intellectual curiosity, the honest manifestation of feelings, courage, and strength of will. The converse of this pedagogical weather report has industriousness, social conformity, modesty, and religious orientation on the wane (cf. Forum Familie Stark Machen 2009). Everyday observation confirms this intuitively, what with the deep-seated determination that our children should have it better than we did making parenting an intergenerational compensation mechanism and me-first attitude generator.

Tempting as it is to dwell on the various findings of such studies and comment on them in terms of pedagogical invariables—that is not my real intent here, or only peripherally. My title suggests a different perspective. Inquiry into the “constants in education” implies taking education as a form and as an autonomous operative mechanism. With the popular media impressing upon us the unreasonable demands of our little “tyrants in tennis shoes” and singing the praises of old-fashioned discipline, my perspective may seem sober and unspectacular. However, cooling media fever is perhaps not the worst thing scholarly consideration can do.

The following deliberations are subdivided into two parts. First, using graphic representations, I shall try to illustrate how education works as a form and as an operative mechanism. In a second step, I shall elaborate on five preconditions for its success.

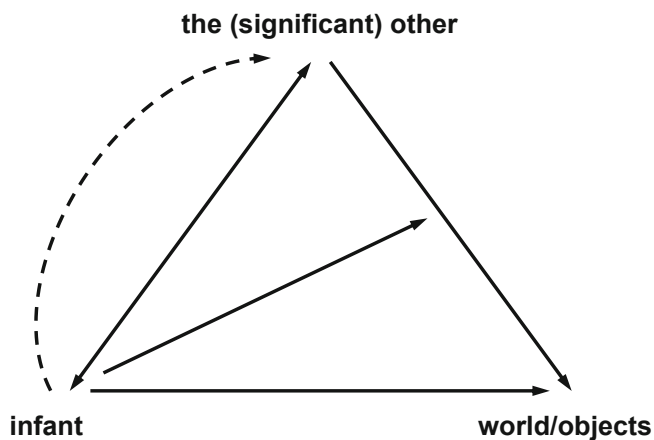
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Education as Form and Operative Mechanism

If I wanted to use a different heading for the following remarks, “the Bermuda Triangle of education” would not be bad. Like ships and planes between Bermuda, Florida and Puerto Rico, education seems to disappear mysteriously in the triangles I am about to discuss. My theoretical deliberations must try to bring it back.

The Evolutionary Triangle of Education

The first triangle gives us the big picture. In a quasi-Darwinian sense, education can be seen as a kind of evolutionary flexible response (cf. Trembl 2004) interconnecting three great magnitudes: nature, human consciousness, and culture and society.



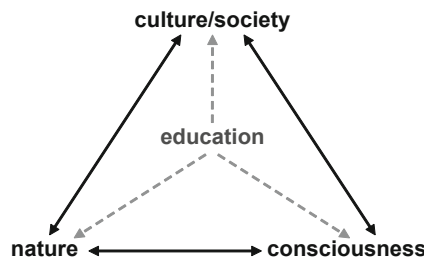
Education cannot be reduced to any one of these three magnitudes but binds them together in a triad. Only in this way can two problems be dealt with as the unity of their difference, namely the problem of origin, of reproduction, the birth problem, so to speak, and the problem of the past, of tradition and conservation, what might be called collective memory. Education thus stands for conservation and change, and variety and redundancy. Its true function consists of providing both simultaneously: conservation *and* change.

Here we discover—a consoling thought—that education must always also misfire a bit, for it is in the nature of education to fall short of the hopes placed in it and disappoint expectations (cf. Winkler 2006, pp. 59 et seq.; see also Kraft 2009b). Whenever education is coupled exclusively with only one or even two of the three magnitudes, the result is malfunction or stagnation. This can be observed in closed educational systems stressing, say, individual consciousness and society. Development comes to a standstill and sooner or later, after profound upheavals, the triangle reconstitutes itself.

The Ontogenetic Triangle of Education

The second triangle proceeds from research by contemporary cultural-anthropology-minded developmental psychologists such as Michael Tomasello (2002, 2009). The perspective here is a different one, not phylogenesis, the development of the whole line of descent, but ontogenesis, the development of the individual.

Of special importance here is a phenomenon which is sometimes called the “nine-month revolution”. A triangle of a very different kind is constituted between age 9 months and age 13–15 months. In this space of time, the mode of communication is transformed fundamentally—no longer dyadic, it assumes a triadic configuration. This so-called “joint attention” developmental complex usually transveres three stages: it begins with the child confirming attention (“We both look at the same thing”), proceeds to the child following attention (“I look at what you look at”) and culminates in the child directing attention (“You look at what I look at”). This constitutes a referential triangle of child, adult, and object of attention. The third stage marks the onset of the deictic gestures with which small children point to an object or hold it up trying to direct the attention of adults to it. Three stick figure drawings illustrate what I mean (cf. Tomasello 2002, p. 81):

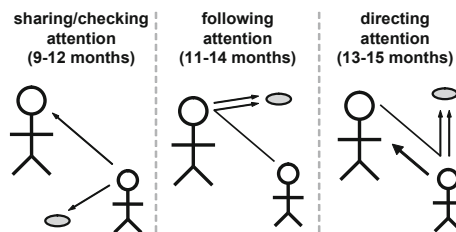


This developmental complex has to do with the fact that children, at this age, begin to conceive of themselves as intentionally active individuals and extrapolate from this basis to others, thus gaining additional insight into how these “others” tick. Since, as is generally accepted, even infants assume that “other persons are similar to me”, every new insight into the child’s own activity leads directly to a new understanding of the activity of others. Perception, and this is the decisive point, is directly connected with intentions, which is seen most clearly in pointing to something. Pointing to something combines self-referentiality and outside referentiality with object referentiality: someone shows somebody something. In other words, triangulation is the fundamental mechanism by which we explore the world from earliest childhood: we focus on a third thing from two different perspectives.

In his highly instructive book *Exploring the Origins of Thinking*, the English psychoanalyst and autism researcher Peter Hobson (2003), more so than Tomasello, devotes special attention to the inner processes necessary to this triangulation.

Hobson speaks of the irresistible pull of identification which draws the baby to adult consciousness and thence to various perspectives on objects in the world. Hence, adult attitudes, feelings, and emotions take on such immense, literally “fundamental” significance. This is also the locus of what distinguishes human behavior from the behavior of primates. For primates, the fellow primate is only a signpost stimulus, so to speak, on the path to the object, a way station, an interesting surface phenomenon. But there is no developmental dynamic involved, and primates can learn nothing about the relationship between consciousness and the outer world. Their inner world is closed off from their fellows, terra incognita (cf. Tomasello 2008). For this reason, one might add, primates have no teachers, no schools, and no parental wish that the young learn something in particular in a particular way.

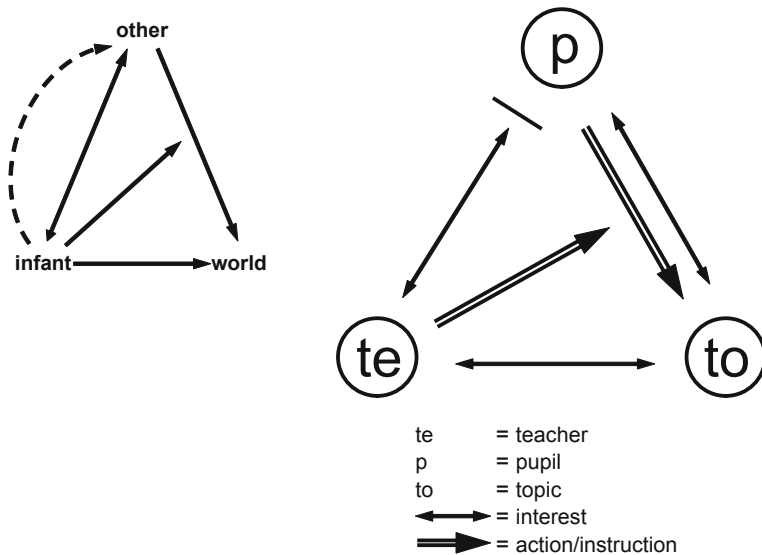
The triangle that results from the “nine-month revolution”, which I will call a developmental-psychological triangle, looks like this (cf. Hobson 2003, p. 249):



What do we see? In joint attention mode, the child is in direct contact with three aspects: the child is occupied with an object in the world and is in emotional touch with another, an individual who is likewise occupied with the object. This is exactly what the child observes, the occupation of the other with the same object (represented as the line bisecting the triangle). The two object relationships may differ. For example, the child may be suspicious of the object but observes that the other, perhaps the child’s mother, is smiling in amusement. Through identification (the dotted line) with the inner world of the other and the realization that the other’s attitude towards the object is a different one, the child is enabled to assume that attitude can revise and refashion his own relationship to the object.

The Didactic Triangle and the Form of Education

Why have we taken this detour into developmental psychology? The answer brings us to a third triangle. As I hope to show, individual development also gives us the blueprint for education. We only need to flip-flop two positions in order to transform the developmental-psychological triangle into a pedagogical, or didactic, triangle:



On the left, we have the developmental-psychological triangle and on the right, the didactic triangle (after Wolfgang Sünkel 1996, p. 64). The pupil (p) is interested, we hope, in an object/subject/topic (to) in which the teacher (te) is also interested (joined attention). Analogously to the child and the other, the teacher's observations and interventions, i.e., instruction, act on the pupil's active interest in the subject. By "transference" as articulated by showing and telling on the part of the teacher, the pupil's relationship to the subject changes to resemble that of the teacher.

In both triangles, a bisecting arrow points to the relationship between the infant/teacher and the interest of the other (pupil) in an object (subject). In the didactic triangle, however, this is a double line rendering the fact that a professional pedagogical operation is at work, whereas the single line in the developmental-psychological triangle indicates an intuitive process which becomes clearer and more methodical only in the course of further development. We also note in the didactic triangle that the line connecting teacher and pupil does not fully connect at the pupil end, showing that in institutional education, the pedagogical professional, unlike the family member, is not primarily interested in the pupil as a person but as a learner.

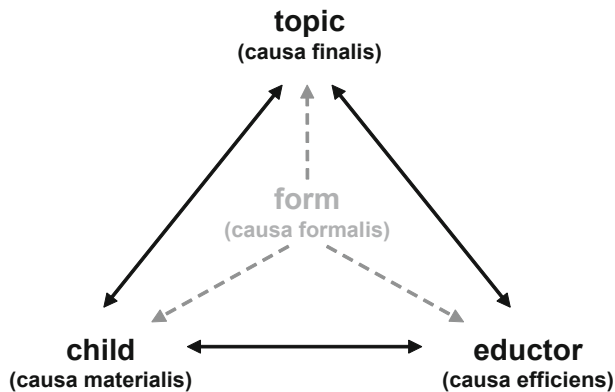
When we teach children, what we are doing is basically the same thing as what they do themselves at a crucial stage of their cognitive development. The pedagogical form is thus an elaboration of this early prelingual development experience, which is why the teaching situation is intuitively, unreflectedly familiar. In other words, being taught is not something we must learn later because it has the same form as the scheme by which we, with the help of others, initially embarked on understanding the world. Pedagogical activity is thus the continuation of this early intuitive deictic structure. Pointing and showing is inherent or implicit in all learning, and teachers manifest and utilize this formal component of the learning process to produce results.

Even as adults, when we learn new things as autodidacts, so to speak, we discover that showing and learning come together as when we were children. One is reminded of Heidegger: “Teaching is giving, presenting; but what is given or presented is not that which is to be learned but rather the directive to the pupil to take for himself what he already has. When the pupil simply takes what is given, he does not learn . . . True learning takes place only when the taking of what one already has is a *giving to oneself* and is experienced as such” (1975, p. 56). Our look at early development clearly shows, as Hegel put it (1986, p. 81), “children’s innate striving for education”, a *need*, then, inherent to us all, that underlies all education and is not to be frustrated lightly.

Education itself can be grasped as the unity of the difference between showing and learning: When we teach, something is shown; when we teach successfully, the learner is enabled to show what has been shown (cf. Prange 2005). The object shown is the knowledge of the world needed to conduct our lives independently and responsibly, including habits and skills, and knowledge and attitudes. Hence, showing takes several forms. It can be demonstrative, when the operation or working of something is shown, or representative, when models are used, or directive, when rules are presented, or reflexive, for example in discussions (cf. Prange and Strobel-Eisele 2006; Kraft 2009a, pp. 181 et seq.). However, showing and learning are very different operations which are not simply linearly connected. No direct path leads from good intentions to good results. Rather, the two processes, as in all communication, must be related and attuned to one another, synchronized, so as not to leave results to chance.

This is the task of articulation, which connects showing and learning in two important ways. On the one hand, the object to be shown must be broken down, dissected, and compartmentalized, which also produces a sequence of first this, then that, and finally the last thing. On the other hand, learning and showing must be brought close to one another, at least for a certain period. Perhaps I can put it like this: Pedagogical activity, like bridge-building, arches toward the learning consciousness, but the closing of the gap, the ultimate connection in consensual understanding, cannot be forced by the showing side. It must follow independently from the learning side. Learning, like loving, is fundamentally individual and cannot be delegated. Money cannot buy it. This is the crucial difference between pedagogy and technology and represents the inevitable structural insecurity in professions that seek to influence the behavior of others using communicative means (cf. Kraft 2009a, pp. 105 et seq.).

One crucial constant in education is thus found in the specific form underlying its operation, abstract but time-honored, which I offer here, the fourth and last triangle, as a kind of interim conclusion (cf. Prange 2005, p. 55). As we see, the form of education proceeds from the connection between child, teacher, and theme or topic:



We cannot help but be alienated by the one or the other unattractive assumption in our triangle. The child, for example, appears as the medium of education (cf. Luhmann 1991) or, even less appealing, as the raw material with which education fulfills its functions. The teacher, on the other hand, is the prime mover, the bearer of knowledge and normative demands as well as the risk factor hovering over education. Where do the themes and topics come from, and who decides which are worthy and which are not? If we call to mind the influence on modern digital childhood of the new media, our triangle begins to lose shape. One might also ask how pedagogical activity differs from psychotherapeutic treatment. In psychotherapy, the triangle collapses in that the theme or topic under discussion wanders down to the position of the child or patient, psychological pathologies being problems that the mind has with itself. Thus, the fundamental form of psychotherapy is dyadic. However, these are deliberations that would take us beyond our bounds here.

As promised, I will now proceed in a second step to point out some of the most important preconditions of the operative mechanism of education.

Body, Emotion, Time, Space, and Socio-Structural Situation

There are five important preconditions, somewhat like concentric circles, for us to look at: body, emotion, time, space, and socio-structural situation.

The first precondition is almost self-evident and need only be mentioned: The pedagogical triangle normally assumes the presence of an intact body, with biology also coming into play as the maturity and physical and mental development needed for learning ability.

The second precondition is basically a continuation of the first, with pedagogical operations assuming the presence of an emotional foundation on which to build (cf. Klika and Schubert 2004). This is true especially of education in the family context, whereby not only the importance of family bonds (cf. Karen 1998) is meant but also the more or less conscious intentions and expectations, wishes and dreams that move

people to have children. In a noteworthy interview on “Universals in Raising Children”, Bronfenbrenner (1992, pp. 51 et seq.) stresses “the development of a highly charged irrational emotional bond to another human being” as the crucial prerequisite of good parenting: “Somebody has got to be crazy about the kid.” Furthermore, it is of tremendous advantage if this “craziness” is grounded in social support structures, for example, involving a third person, preferably but not necessarily of the other sex, who can comment, compensate, help, criticize, and moderate by offering new perspectives and thus open up new latitude for action, someone who is simply there. Small wonder, then, that the two-parent family continues to be seen as the crucial context for the child’s socialization. Quoth Bronfenbrenner once more, it is “hard, hard work being all alone with a child” (Bronfenbrenner 1992).

The third elementary precondition on our list of the constants in education is often overlooked: time! There is, I would posit, a unique time quality in education, pedagogical time, so to speak, the significance of which makes itself felt in various ways. No one knows better than teachers that learning, the build-up of mental structures and the development of insights, takes time—so much so that one is reminded of Gorbachev’s proverbial (in Germany) admonition that life punishes those who come too late, i.e., in our case, who need too much time or go the long way. And then there is the often-made observation that what Johnny does not learn John never learns, i.e., that certain learning tasks are best and most easily tackled at certain auspicious times in life, on time, so to speak. Not to forget the problem that arises trying to bring parent time and child time into sync, beginning early in the morning when the alarm goes off and continuing all day long. The time problem can be more clearly grasped in the light of recent sociological theory, for example Hartmut Rosa’s impressive study on “acceleration” (2005) in which he looks at the “changes in the time structures in the modern world”. Modern society, Rosa finds, is an “accelerated society” characterized by a structural and cultural *mélange* of “technological acceleration” and “increased living speed resulting from greater scarcity of time resources”.

Time passes more slowly at school, because work there is subject to certain “anthropological speed limits” (Rosa 2005, p. 139) that are set by maturation, development, and learning. Education must insist on “deceleration”. Educational processes resist acceleration. Other systems may tend toward acceleration, but pedagogical processes and institutions remain “islands of deceleration” in the torrent of modern life (Rosa 2005, p. 143). This is not a new insight in the history of our discipline. Rousseau (cf. Kraft 1997) knew it already. We read in *Emile*, for example, that in education one must always lose time in order to gain it—selective deceleration as an acceleration strategy, we call that nowadays.

The idea of a unique “education time” in which the dynamic of cultural and societal developments is pedagogically slowed down and methodically extended and stretched leads us to the fourth constant: Education demands not only its own time but also its own spaces in time and loci in which it is organized and institutionalized. Institutionalization here can be understood in Gehlen’s sense as a “cultural prosthesis” where something which is not present in nature, or only insufficiently present, is placed on safe footing and taken out of the realm of chance. Education as a social function cannot, like most other interactions, stop just any old where and start up

again later. Learning implies duration and thus its own spaces, implies organizations that serve no other purpose.

Historically, over the centuries, education has become increasingly exclusively organized, a process that has taken place in connection with compulsory education. School is not life, as the Latins knew, but going to school is not something that is left to the discretion of the pupil, or his parents. Different societies have approached the organization of education in different ways. Closed systems such as the former East Germany have solved the problem differently than open societies. The inherent logic of organizations can distort or falsify the purpose for which they were founded, or miss it altogether. It is not easy to change such organizations either, as we have seen in the ongoing debate on school forms and preschool offerings in this country. The stage of economic development of a society, of course, is important too. In some countries of the Third World, parents of education-hungry children must out-and-out hide their offspring from school, not because they see no value in education but because children are indispensable as labor. The exclusive organization of education is thus by no means a matter of course, as obvious as it may seem to us here.

This brings us to the fifth and last prerequisite and constant. The pedagogical triangle is always embedded in a sociostructural situation. I shall discuss this final aspect in two dimensions, the material dimension and the normative dimension.

It goes without saying that the material dimension has huge influence on education. German government reports and, for example, the 2007 UNICEF study on “Child Poverty in Rich Nations” show that relatively small deficits in material resources can have a disproportionately negative effect on the course of an individual’s life and lead to increasingly constrictive social exclusion. Two variables are of particular importance here, the degree of integration in the job market and the realized or realizable individual educational level. The effect of these two factors on the actual life of children is shown by the first World Vision study of children (2007) and the more recent study of child poverty by the University of Bielefeld, the latter using qualitative methods that show how material poverty manifests itself in the subjective experience of children (cf. Andresen and Fegter 2009). However, whatever research one consults, educational level, educational participation, and parental educational aspirations are clearly the crucial variables. We know, for example, that an increase in reading proficiency in elementary school by as little as a single standard deviation increases the likelihood of the child’s gaining entry to ‘Gymnasium’ by more than 10 %. We also know that poor educational background and low household income as manifested in family attitudes towards education drastically reduce the likelihood of the child’s taking advantage of early intervention and other preschool education and childcare offerings (cf. Rossbach and Blossfeld 2009).

To be sure, more money alone does not seem to be the key to greater fairness and efficiency in the educational system. Empirical studies using the so-called life-cycle perspective (Wössmann 2008) show that it is crucial to invest money in the right area at the right moment. In Germany, compared to other European countries, investment of public money is relatively greater in later education than in early education. In other words, Germany spends too much money at levels where education cannot effectively redress social inequalities and too little money at levels where it can.

The sociostructural framework manifests itself not only in material terms but also normatively. Education is unthinkable without normative demands. “What does the older generation expect of the younger?” Schleiermacher asked in his famous lecture in 1826. This is a question which cannot be answered purely on the basis of the pedagogical triangle. Instead, the larger social power structure, whether teachers like it or not, provides answers in powerful ways: implicitly in thought patterns and mentalities that run through everyday life (for example as to whether young people should give older people their seats on the bus), explicitly in the legal framework of education, and in public discourse on educational questions. What is taught and learnt at school must be buttressed by and linked to what goes on around us. It is connected with a kind of protopedagogical forestructure (cf. Winkler 2006, pp. 143 et seq.), an implicit concept of what is proper educated behavior, an implicit consensus on how children and adolescents are to be dealt with and on the norms and rules that govern such dealings. Education can never be “better” than the world it is a part of.

In premodern social structures, daily social intercourse sufficed to anchor proper behavior; it did not have to be taught explicitly. This has changed completely. Social modernization processes have increasingly made a problem of both parenting and education, whereby, according to postmodernist cultural criticism (cf. Winkler 2006, pp. 181 et seq.), the effects of three developments intensify one another: the exponentially increasing dynamism of social change, the subversion of the national welfare state by global capitalism, and the reduced cohesion of cultural patterns by mass-media dilution and ephemeralization. The structure of public space has changed profoundly, with not only the major narratives seeming to disappear but also the many smaller and greater borderlines so important for parenting and education being effaced, causing normative orientations seemingly to melt away. With all social spheres in the grip of “disembedding”, a multitude of individualization mechanisms are triggered. As media-based learning becomes universalized, pedagogical activities lose their legitimation and self-education becomes the norm.

To be sure, cultural criticism has been a fixture in our inventory almost from the beginning of the history of education. The pedagogical mind has a predilection for taking a stand against social conditions it sees as detrimental to education; it invents alternative worlds or pedagogical “provinces”, even states. However, there is no escaping society as it is. Criticism of late-modern social structures is not primarily a moral challenge to pedagogical thinking but rather an operative challenge. Increasingly, social structures pressure education to perform. This does not place limitations so much on pedagogical mechanisms as on the way we think about them, our pedagogical illusions. Empirical studies show this: Education and parenting are increasingly experienced as hard work, with parents decrying the lack of social recognition for their efforts (cf. Forum Familie Stark Machen 2009).

The educational system is only an instrument in the conductorless orchestra of modern functional society. But of course it is expected to play on key. This is the final and perhaps ultimate constant in education.

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