



# Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies

- » JAAACS Home
- » Article Archive
- » Editorial Statement
- » Call for Manuscripts
- » Author Guidelines
- » Editorial Board
- » Review Board

- » Submit An Article
- » Contact JAAACS

Volume 3

February 2007

## **Towards European Curriculum Studies: Reconsidering some basic tenets of Bildung and Didaktik**

**Tero Autio, PhD**

**Professor**

**Department of Teacher Education,  
University of Tampere**

[tero.autio@uta.fi](mailto:tero.autio@uta.fi)

Presidential Address at the AAACS Meeting, April 2006, San Francisco, USA

I like to express my gratitude for the kind invitation of Presidents Janet Miller and William Pinar to present here in this special event tonight. I really feel honored and privileged to be here. And I want also to greet you from the part of the organizing committee of the Second World Curriculum Studies Conference, 21-24. in May this year, in my home town Tampere, in Finland. And I want also thank the organizers of this conference, I am sure that you have all the reasons to be happy after the days you will spend here.

My presentation tonight will deal with only some fragments of the long and multifaceted tradition of the Bildung/Didaktik. Together with the Anglo-American Curriculum tradition Didaktik/didactics is the second pillar of the two curriculum 'superdiscourses' whose total influence in the field of education worldwide in one form or another has been insurmountable.

### ***Some historical remarks***

The admiration of Antiquity plays a central role in the theory of Bildung. Bildung is initially and predominantly conceived as cultivation, as a precondition for an educated public. In this sense the understanding of the Bildung of man that does not base primarily on knowledge, but equates Bildung with feeling, or sentiment. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the important figure in Bildung -tradition, in his writings from 1769-1800, believes that what actually guides man is a feeling of virtue. Herder examines this feeling under the framework of a philosophical historical concept, the core idea of which is development towards an ultimate goal: the Bildung of humanity. For Herder, the romantic analogy with nature is vital for the notion of Bildung.

Nature unfolds organically unspoiled, almost

mystically, and certainly not rationally. This conception of nature is a hallmark of Herder's concept of *Bildung* and forms the basis for the subsequent treating of *Bildung* theory as separate from any political context – and establishes definitely the inwardness ideology of the concept of *Bildung*. With this, Herder formulates a concept of *Bildung* that through the course of the 18th century wins out over other interpretations: *Bildung* is a non-political concept that focuses on the individual's process of inner self-development, unfolding, self-cultivation – in accordance with an organic concept of nature and natural development (Horlacher 2004, p. 421).

The other defining feature, (not distinct from that of nature) of the term *Bildung* is its bearing with aesthetics. *Bildung* as term was to emerge in the 18th century in the context of the category of the "Schöne Wissenschaften" (literally "The Beautiful Sciences", in English or French roughly "fine arts" or "belle lettres et beaux arts"). The term "sciences" was being used synonymously with the "arts". Sciences and arts did not mean an academic discipline but rather general knowledge or general learning on a subject. The pedagogic and aesthetic intentions of the beautiful sciences and arts were complemented by theological ones. The aim of the content of beautiful sciences and arts was to reveal to the humankind, in an articulated and disciplined way, the beauty and meaning of the God-created reality. As God's gifts to man, the study of Schöne Wissenschaften, gave mankind the chance to partially raise itself from the depths of sin of the Fall (Horlacher 2004, p. 422).

It was just Johann Gottfried Herder, one of the main progenitors of geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik (hermeneutically inspired education studies), who explicitly relates the term "Schöne Wissenschaften" to *Bildung*. In a paper from 1782 Herder writes that according to the ancients it was the Schöne Wissenschaften that made us *human*, that formed and cultivated us as human beings, so that one might best call them the *bildende* (cultivating, educating) sciences. That which cultivates and forms our minds and souls is beautiful; that which does not does not deserve to be called Schöne Wissenschaften, even if it is made out to be golden. Herder's interpretations contributed decisively that the concept *Bildung* replaced the term Schöne Wissenschaften, but at the same time, it takes over the same pedagogical and aesthetic meanings that were ascribed to it during the 18th century (Horlacher 2004, p.423).

Since then, this inward concept of *Bildung*, the idea of *Bildung* as an inner sanctum, came to dominate educational debate in the search for the scholarly establishment of education and pedagogy as a discipline. The competing visions of the irreconcilable variety of human inwardness with theological traditions and biologic-organic connotations resulted in a concept that is widely diffuse and has enormous variance in its meanings.

Consequently, it proved to be the ideal platform for all sorts of interpretations and controversies and this feature has remained

constant and unresolved in the long *Bildung*-tradition (Horlacher 2004, p.424).

This basic structure of human mind to define itself on the basis of its own idiosyncratic inwardness got its lasting expression in the Classical German Idealism with its ideals of freedom and autonomy. Classical Idealism from Kant to Hegel drew but from the German Movement 1770-1830 also from the Cartesian cognitive revolution from 17th century. In his *Principia Philosophiae* from 1637/1640 (French edition) Descartes had laid down the epistemic principles that effectively replaced speculative theological infinity with respectively infinite but secularized cognitive-pragmatic vistas freed from religious authorities and traditional Aristotelian bonds (Autio 2006, pp. 38-42).

Accordingly, the *Bildung* –discourse became pregnant by the expressions like self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*), freedom, emancipation, autonomy, maturity/responsibility (*Mündigkeit*), reason, self-activity (Klafki 1991, p.19). *Bildung* was to be understood as a capability or competence to self-definition that means the liberation from outer determination to inner-directedness: to act, think and decide on the basis of one's autonomous reason as the famous dictum in Immanuel Kant's essay *What is Enlightenment* encourages: dare to use your own reason. For Kant, the Enlightenment and (inward or personal) *Bildung* was closely intertwined; to be enlightened or educated meant to get free from "self-induced tutelage".

Throughout the German classical period or German Movement (1770-1830) ("classical" refers to the conscious effort to reinvigorate the ancient Greek ideals (the idea of *paideia*) and simultaneously to transcend and rephrase it in modern terms) the basic intention is to be summarized to a view of human being 1) as free, capable to rational and responsible self-determination, and, 2) every human being already, as a birth gift, has this inclination to freedom and self-determination. *Bildung* would render both a method and an outcome of this process of self-actualization.

The inwardness -thesis within all theories of *Bildung* should not, however, come to be interpreted as an expression of extreme subjectivism (for instance, as a Cartesian solipsistic self, or, from the present point of view, as a self-sufficient or self-autarkic notion of neoliberal self). The I-World relationship would form an "equiprimordial" epistemological platform to condition the process of *Bildung* (Klafki 1991, p. 20). *Bildung* –theories deviate from psychological self-actualization theories of the 20th century. Essential constituent of the subjectivity is an active interaction with a content or "World": inter-subjectivity is a precondition for subjectivity. This cognitive-ontological posture is reflected as a special emphasis on content in many Didaktik schools of thought (Didaktik meaning a concrete educational operations guided by the ideas of *Bildung*). The parameters of the content aspect (*Inhaltlichkeit*) in *Bildung* theories are not confined to the present: they are large cultural and historical bodies of knowledge and human achievements often carrying a moral or rational flavor, like humanity, humankind, World, objectivity, general. The content

aspect in terms of Bildung may contain different institutions of need satisfactions, knowledge about nature and social reality, about political regulation and governance, of moral and norm systems, knowledge of aesthetic products and pieces of art, of the different interpretations of human existence in philosophies, religions, and ideologies (see Klafki 1991, pp. 15-40). In a nutshell, in this content sense, the Bildung -theoretical thought comes close to that what here in the United States is known as the Great Books movement celebrating the ideas of the ancient paideia or the Renaissance *uomo universale* as the educational goal of educated public, and as a backbone of modern civil society and the nation state.

Despite many undeniable achievements and irresistible attractions of Bildung, there appear a host of critical questions when we reread it as it is recorded in its own historical, educational and curricular manifestations and as a history of the present education theory and practice in the context of globalization. Due to their non-political nature, Bildung -theories were not able to bridge the gap between aesthetics and politics as some of the proponents of Bildung-based critical theory hoped still in the 20th century (e.g. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer), but education remained captured within aestheticized, even mystified human nature. The mystification of reality got a decisive impetus from G.F.W. Hegel's most influential theory of the universal unfolding of the spirit (Geist) (e.g. Juntunen & Mehtonen 1977).

Aesthetically figured inward idiosyncrasy, initially present in Bildung, became restructured in Hegel's dynamic theory of the world spirit. For Hegel, the successive phases of the spirit: subjective, objective, and absolute spirit and the interaction between them formed Hegel's dialectic immanent triad and his very original explication of the modernization process freed from the traditional authorities. Subjective spirit was about the individual, objective spirit was the realm of cultural products, nation, society and other institutional or collective embodiments of the subjective spirit. The most peculiar constituent in Hegel's dialectical theory was his notion of the absolute spirit as a total effect of the interaction between 'lower spirits' but still autonomous and the final and true goal of the self-development of the spirit. In the sphere of the absolute spirit, spirit could reach its true essence, manifest itself as most free and most rational. The world has a teleological, rational structure immanent in the spirit and the world moves irrevocably toward its own perfection - despite the backlashes in empirical history. These backlashes Hegel recognized as the manifestations of the cunning of reason. For him what was real was rational and vice versa; every historical event could be subsumed under the guidance of absolute spirit even if a single individual was unable to discover it (c.f. Juntunen & Mehtonen 1977).

Important in Hegel's many ways peculiar and cryptic theory is that it influentially informed many variants of the so called hermeneutically inspired educational schools of thought (geisteswissenschaftliche Paedagogik or Didaktik, e.g. Dilthey and Spranger). In Didaktik, influenced by Hegel's theory, this meant that individuality would be reordered under the rational regimes of objective and absolute spirit and the initial inward idiosyncrasy was

rephrased in rational terms of objective spirit, it is, put somewhat bluntly: under the principles of governance of the emerging nation state and of the German *Volksgeist* (collective national spirit)(cf. Rousseau's *volonté general*). *Volksgeist* was something that got its specific significance and expression in German language, nature, race, and nation and set the "objective" limits for the *Bildung* of individual subjectivity.

In the German educational context there are still left elements of the glorification of the mythical element of the race and the state, which are to be reflected in the design of the curricula and in the expectations of teaching ethos. Erich Weniger (1894-1961) one of the leading figures in the *Didaktik* tradition, ascribed this nationalistic element, what he calls "objective structure", to the moral qualifications of teachers and educators in an article which is translated in English in 2000 entitled as *Didaktik as a theory of education*.

The guarantors of this inner form of state are never the institutions and curricula themselves, whose spirit can be misinterpreted and sabotaged, but living human beings who feel responsible for both the state and education. In curricula, the state gives responsible-thinking, civically, and educationally oriented people the opportunity of showing the young its worth, and *whoever wishes to serve the state and at the same time provide a truly worthwhile education must adapt themselves to this objective structure* (Weniger 2000, p. 120, emphasis added).

These institutional restrictions of the inwardness of human mind and its free, idiosyncratic configuration were, of course, at odds with the philosophical idealism that nevertheless kept hold its unspecified premises of freedom, reason, responsibility, and autonomy.

The basic intellectual structure of *Bildung* and *Didaktik* is very complicated and very sophisticated in terms of perennial philosophy, but perhaps just for that *Bildung* remains in a fatal way vague and inarticulated in many vital areas of education, especially in political and gender terms. Despite the huge erudition and brilliant analyses of many those pioneers in German classical idealism (Herder, Schiller, Fichte, Kant, Hegel, Schelling, etc.) and, respectively, in the *Bildung* and *Didaktik* tradition (Dilthey, Spranger, Nohl, Litt, Flitner, Weniger, Klafki, etc.), just by the weight and assumed legitimacy of their erudition, preconceived both the world and the world of education, as they saw it, through their own privileged status, education and tradition.

The original organic and teleological metaphors of nature and nation attached to the *Bildung* were useful while legitimizing the political and social status quo as natural and evident. The Hegelian notion of the unfolding of the spirit as immanent, universal and teleological process effectively undermined any conscious political efforts to change the order of things. (It was just Karl Marx while partly admiring Hegel, partly abhorring his philosophical fatalism

undertook to turn – as he said - the Hegel’s theory back on its feet, to give the keys of change to people themselves. It was not a successful story either as we have learned).

Jacques Derrida has remarked how Immanuel Kant also attempts to naturalize the European universalist hegemony through a teleological trick or ruse of nature whereby

Greco-Roman Europe, western philosophy and history, I would even venture to say continental philosophy and history, play a determining, central, exemplary role, as if nature, in its rational ruse, had given Europe responsibility for this special mission: not only to found history as such, and primarily as science, not only to found philosophy as such, and primarily as science, but also to found a rational philosophical history and to ‘one day give laws’ to all other continents (Derrida, in Venn 2000, p. 59).

(The present economic and managerial stress on education draws, partly at least, arguably, on political demands on the uniformity of the world like the former U.S. foreign minister Colin Powell summarized it: *a major challenge for the millenium is to install freely elected democracies all over the world, under one standard for the world which is the free market system ... practiced correctly*).

The non-political universalism, a preconceived universal morality as its core, along with a kind of cognitive arrogance depreciated universalism to the demands of uniformity, and paradoxically enough, still in the name of individuality, freedom, reason, and autonomy. Hegel has a famous saying which is not just a joke and not foreign to us living the 21st century: people must be forced to be free.

From uniformity it is not a long way to instrumentality and standardization. In Kant’s criticism of the education of his time the tenor of human perfection and freedom by control and standardization is perceivable. Kant (1991) writes:

Under the present educational system man does not fully attain to the object of his being; for in what various ways men live! Uniformity can only result when all men act according to the same principles, which principles would have to become with them a second nature (p. 9).

For Kant, however, the history was not yet ended as our neoliberal mentors want to teach us now. Uniformity was for Kant a dynamic concept and it could be achieved and warranted only when both types of principles, moral and scientific, formed the basis of education. In the first place, he sought to maintain the *moral* idea of education through the successive generations and across fluctuations of empirical history. For that reason the idea and art (Kunst) of education had to be interpreted by every new generation and to be stored as the “mechanism of education”. To be

progressive, however, education cannot be but mechanical repetition of the practices of previous generations; it was in constant need of reinterpretation and reflection: "If education is to develop human nature so that it may attain the object of its being, it must involve the exercise of judgment" (Kant 1991, p. 13). Precisely the application of *judgment* meant an attempt to enlarge the realm of reason, not restricted solely to its "mechanical", instrumental, and traditional uses but ensuring a certain moral endurance, an intellectual comprehensiveness, and a practical vitality and innovation in a transgenerational conception of education. As if anticipating the colonization of reason and educative experience by scientific, administrative, and commercial instrumentalism Kant (1991) warned by the hermeneutic formula:

Intelligence divorced from judgment produces nothing but foolishness. Understanding is the knowledge of the general. Judgment is the application of the general to the particular. Reason is the power of understanding the connection between the general and the particular (p.71).

The stress on the judgmental aspect of reason as a vital part of science, a most important instance of intelligence, justified Kant in proposing that the "mechanism of education must be changed into a science" (p. 14). Yet he wanted to maintain a certain balance between the mechanical/instrumental and the ideal:

Education and instruction must not be merely mechanical; they must be founded upon fixed principles; although at the same time education must not merely proceed by way of reasoning, but must be, in a certain sense, mechanical (p. 22).

Kant's hesitation between the "mechanical"/instrumental and the ideal have had a profound influence on the shape of modern science in general and of the study of education and curriculum in particular. They reflected the debate ongoing since Thomas Hobbes and Giambattista Vico over the identity of scientific study: does it consist in only one universal scientific method or should the study of human nature, culture and society be profiled according to different principles? The suggested division and subsequent debate between Understanding (*Verstehen*) and Explanation (*Erklären*) has dominated some part of the discussion within the philosophy of science since the middle of the 18th century. According to Josef Blass (1978, p. 49) Kant's theory of education contributed decisively to the emergence and establishment of a duality in the methodology of educational and curriculum studies, hermeneutically inspired *geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik and Didaktik* and empirically oriented educational disciplines such as the psychology and sociology of education. Curiously enough, this line of methodological division has featured in the *Didaktik* tradition of the German and North-European countries and Curriculum Studies in the North-America. American curriculum studies traditionally inspired by psychology has move quite recently toward the Continental tradition with the increasingly influential Reconceptualization Movement, which seems in many respects to

revive and critically revise hermeneutic interests by introducing political, postmodern, poststructural, feminist and other non-traditional theories into the field, thus deconstructing the traditional totalizing and authoritative accounts within the both traditions.

But Kant's dilemmas were not restricted to the methodological issues. The core in the *Bildung* –thought, the enhancement of morality in terms of freedom, reason, and autonomy in the individual and in the humankind at large, met in his educational theory intellectual difficulties that are instructive in regard to the whole *Bildung* and *Didaktik* movement. And, beyond that, one could argue, they are very instructive reread as the history of the present educational problems.

Kant's influence was and is profound, especially his concern with morality and virtue as the overriding purpose of education dominated most subsequent theory, although it was not equally manifested in practice. Henceforth all serious theorists followed his lead in searching the patterns of human nature, in particular the structure of the mind and the ways in which this orders our perceptions. They were also concerned with the two areas of intellectual and moral education and how these might reasonably be the subject of a science of education (Bowen 1981, p. 218).

The rising role of psychology in education is anticipated in these words. But concomitant with this development there remains a serious challenge to the comprehensive pattern of educational thought. The Kantian dualism between the invisible realm of morality and the sensible and practical world of education, with their methodological incompatibility, and his hesitations as to the possibility of moral knowledge, comprised the seeds for the intellectual displacement of morality from the center of the study of education (see Autio 2006, Ch 6: Curriculum and the Politics of Psychology: "Conformity of Wills and Predictability of Behavior").

Here two considerations are involved. First, Kant introduced into educational thought a new conception which unambiguously articulated the suggestion only latently present in earlier writers like Descartes and Locke: "the perfectibility of man through his own efforts. There is no hint of clerical assistance; Kant showed no interest in religion in education...God is relegated to a remote role, ... and man alone bears the burden of his own perfecting" (Bowen 1981, p. 216). The entirely secularized notion of education was paralleled by enthusiastic vistas regarding the possibility of *Bildung*:

It may be that education will be constantly improved, and that each succeeding generation will advance one step towards the perfecting of mankind; for with education is involved the great secret of the perfection of human nature. It is only now that something may be done in this direction, since for the first time people have begun to judge rightly, and understand

clearly, what actually belongs to a good education. It is delightful to realize that through education human nature will be continually improved, and brought to such a condition as is worthy of the nature of man. This opens out to us the prospect of a happier human race in the future (Kant 1981, pp. 7-8).

Kant seemed to be unable to unite his two worlds within the same thought pattern; he began to think of progress without transcendental moral sources (philosophical or religious) and rather in pragmatic terms of psychological-volitional self-regulation. The shrinkage of the ideal of a free, rational and autonomous subject toward a performative individual burdened with outer obligations is reflected as to how Kant at last defines the purpose of education: "Our ultimate aim is the formation of *character*. Character consists in the firm purpose to accomplish something, and then also in the actual accomplishment of it" (pp. 98-99). ("We are not born to be happy but to do our obligations".)

Kant's failure to incorporate his moral philosophy as a genuine constituent in his educational theory is a paradigmatic case for modern theorizing of education. What remains of the program of the optimistic visions of *Bildung* is the predominance of a performance-oriented and instrumental posture paving the way to the achieving individual in the achieving society, the *Leistungsgesellschaft*.

The colonizing instrumentalist thrust that Kant struggled with more than two hundred years ago is visible both in the American Tylerian tradition as well as in German and North-European Didaktik tradition. Ewald Terhart (2003) bluntly depicts the Didaktik situation at the moment:

In Germany, it has become quiet around general didactics. The controversies of the late 1960s and early 1970s have died down: the theoretical situation has been basically stable for decades. The textbooks still present, with persistence and success, the "theories and models of didactics" systematized by Blankertz ... thirty years ago ... however this is surprising because one might perhaps expect, given the widespread talk about the crisis in instruction, in school, and in the teaching profession, that the wheat of didactics would bloom on a theoretical level. Just the opposite is the case! In general didactics, there has been no theoretical discussion worth speaking of for around 2 decades ... genuine theoretical discussion has been largely replaced by the development and defense of certain teaching methods on a more practical level (pp. 25-26).

Is this picture a part of a larger picture of the world, where the objective spirit is unveiled as a sheer instrumentality as the only unifying tie of the world? Anyhow the German didactics is not here alone, the hold of instrumentality seems to be the kernel of the modernization process, not only in the world of education but more

comprehensively, as Max Weber (1864-1920) attempted to show at the turn of twentieth century. Weber looked through the negative of the light picture of the *Bildung* at the future of humankind, where the relentless march of modernization in terms of instrumental rationality would frame the conditions of life on this earth.

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt (Weber 1920/1995, p. 181).

Yet, in a certain sense, for Max Weber, the Occident was an accident, there are other ways to choose the way of life, there may still be time and space to name education and world differently between the idealistic and utopian good and beautiful of the *Bildung* –theories and the dull but not impossible Weberian vistas.

### References

- Autio, T. 2006. *Subjectivity, Curriculum and Society: Between and Beyond the German Didaktik and Anglo-American Curriculum Studies*. Mahwah, New Jersey. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Blass, J. 1978. *Modelle pädagogischer Theoriebildung I: Von Kant bis Marx (Models for educational theory constructions I: From Kant to Marx)*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Bowen, J. 1981. *A History of Western Education*. Vol III. London: Methuen.
- Horlacher, E. 2004. *Bildung – A Construction of a History of Philosophy of Education*. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 23: 409-426.
- Juntunen, M. & Mehtonen, L. 1977. *Ihmistieteiden filosofiset perusteet (Philosophical foundations for human and social studies)*. Jyväskylä: Gummerus.
- Kant, I. 1991. *Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Klafki, W. 1991. *Neue Studien zur Bildungstheorie und Didaktik*. 2. Erweiterte Auflage. Weinheim und Basel: Beltz Verlag.
- Venn, C. 2000. *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity*. London: Sage Publications.

Weber, M. 1930/1995. *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.

Weniger, E. 2000. *Didaktik as a Theory of Education*. In B.B. Gudem & S. Hopmann (eds), *Didaktik and/or Curriculum: An International Dialogue*. New York: Peter Lang.

---

Copyright for articles published in this journal is retained by the authors,  
with first publication rights granted to the journal.