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Experience and transformative processes (0273)

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Experience is the central keyword in the title of this conference, which calls for “experiencing higher education”. Experience is also an interesting linguistic term which in English combines the two aspects that many other languages distinguish between, namely, the immediate experience of a situation, an impression or a sensation, in short an “empirical reality” *and* the processed and digested experience which is stored as knowledge, memory, and habitual structuring of perception, thinking, and behavior. In other words, it opens the door to the long lasting and complex philosophical distinction between the “*a priori*” and “*a posteriori*” in regard to experience and knowledge.

The capacity of English language to grasp both aspects is probably what manifests in the subtleness of pragmatism represented by names as Pierce, Dewey and Rorty, whereas the continental, and especially the German and Scandinavian, tradition has nourished the distinction between these two aspects as a valuable and constitutional space or abyss for reflection and realization or/and deconstruction, as in the works of Hegel, Kierkegaard and Derrida.

However, no matter which approach is taken in regard to the question of experience there can be no doubt about the profound and strong connection between the two aspects. This is a connection which may prove to be of special significance when the focus is on higher education, - because both the immediate experience and the processing reflection based on and about experience is a core matter in regard to both research and educational processes.

It is a connection which manifests at multiple levels within the field of HE. The immediacy-dimension appears in the presence of the students’ experiences of the educational processes. These experiences are significant factors of professional/vocational socialization, just as they have a strong determining effect on the future of professional practice and research. The immediacy-dimension is also crucial in our perception of practice and, thus, in the ways we interpret present needs and actions in accordance with our constitutional views and values. Finally, as research is increasingly determined by strategic concerns, the immediacy-dimension, by which goals and standards are set up for HE, tends to lead to a rather short-sighted and functional calculation with respect to purpose and outcome.

On the other hand the dimension of reflection and de-/construction has increasingly been occupied with 2., 3.,... order reflections, which provides the subtle means of analyzing and de-/constructing, but doesn’t give indications or grounds for action or realization of the “fulfillment of presence”.

This distanced sort of reflection is what we find in the practice of analyzing and documenting - the functional context we tend to accept as reality.

It is a topic, brilliantly treated by P. Sloterdijk (1.), who gives a most inspiring presentation of the relation between the philosophy of presence, perfectly elaborated by F. Hegel, and the philosophy of reflection and deconstruction, as introduced by J. Derrida. In Sloterdijk’s interpretation Hegel’s philosophy on freedom, absolute knowledge and realized presence marks a peak-point in Western thinking, from where there is nothing more to do, but reflect upon reflections of the already perfected. According to Sloterdijk this leaves the academic scene, in the pacified, visionless and

mainly observing position that dominates research today. It is what is often considered the spell of postmodernity and sometimes accused for lack of ethics and inability to establish a base for value and action, as the works of Derrida and Foucault among others are criticized for.

On this background one may conclude that in the constitutional relation between immediacy and reflection we seem to have lost the idea of purpose or *telos* of reflection. This is the urgent challenge we *do have* to take up in HE, because here is located the “root seeds” of both the avant-garde, introducing visions and orientation for the future, and the consequences of current views manifested in student experience and socialization as well as in means and methodology used in recent research to document and verify the present state of affairs, which again determines our sense of world matters and potentials of risks and perspectives.

Focus of this paper are questions on how we can meet this challenge in order to find ways of transforming key positions in the connection between immediacy and reflection, which can help developing new constitutive grounds for both research and education.

Key positions are such conditions or trends at stake in between immediacy and reflection, which can make the dynamic of transformations and thereby open to epistemological renewal and thus new ways of defining and organizing future research and higher education.

This paper will take up key positions such as:

1. The new exchange between pragmatism and continental humanistic tradition, which carries a great potential for inspiring a kind of “empirical ontology” based on elaborated analytical categories, and thus very different from today’s functional abuse of both philosophical traditions.
2. The present emphasize on global and individual dimensions, which implies the decline of the nation state as defining power. Among the complex indications herein are: competition, harmonization and interculturality in the global aspect and subjectivity, standardization and citizenship in the individual aspect.
3. The decline of the nation state affects the entire field of institutionalized practice, including HE, and calls for new ways of defining purpose, organization and conditions in replacement for the present practice of institutionalizing, based on ideas on unity and standardized practice.
4. The question of what ought to take place in the space between immediacy and the outcome of reflection is a matter of formation and existential orientation known in education and processes of becoming human. This again requires ideas of what it means to be human in modern life among global trends and individual experiences.
This paper suggests that it is *the* urgent task for academics to start focusing on such constitutive reflections as foundation for research and education.
5. Finally, the paper suggests a concept on “ecology of knowledge” as an out-set for working in dynamic complexities, which can open to a renewal of constitutive approaches to research and HE.

Note 1:

Peter Sloterdijk: “Derrida, an Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid”, Polity Press, 2007/2009

