



Narratives: Of the Future of Education when It Comes to an End

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Abstract

This paper aims to reflect if educational theory, at least some of its current representatives, should rely on a "master" narrative to be legitimated or guided in a postmodern age marked precisely, according to Jean-François Lyotard, by the disbelief in metanarratives. Such a condition is all but new and it can be said that we live today the unfolding of most of Lyotard's (accurate) predictions. Nevertheless, this perspective still provides us a powerful set of critical issues to evaluate the relevance of the educational discourse like the one held by Neil Postman on our present (and future) in "The End of Education". His main argument about the "end" of education - in the double sense of goal and of a limit (a third sense is embedded: without a goal, education dies) - is the need for american educators to inculcate back in the students the lacking spirit and greatness that can be drawn from the "American Credo". This proposition could be extended to all claims for national or great narratives able to unite, inspire and guide the educational actors, syllabuses and policies. Postman's thesis comes as a reinforcement as well as a confessed conservative revision of his earlier work, "Teaching as a subversive activity". Most "subversive" imperatives from 1967 remain up to date: questioning prior to readymade answers in the classroom, adaption to change as a surviving strategy, the teacher's role as a "crap detector", among others. The exception is the role and treatment given to narrative: the gods society believes in, craves for, are narrative(s). The only alternative is choosing our gods among such narratives. The classroom becomes then a place to resist the outside gods and to recite the story of the inspiring ones: the Great American "Experiment" (and its heroes: Lincoln, Jefferson, etc.), the creation of a Common Public, the Great Liberal Democracy, School as a Civilizing space. Let's say, a Collectively Shared Narrative. The unwanted gods are: Consumerism, Technology, Multiculturalism, Insignificance (deconstructive philosophies), Disorder (narratives always point out an order). Postman does not make clear when the teacher's and the student's questioning should stop when the issue is... "great narratives". Or "metanarratives". It is through it, though, that modern times created "its great heroes, great dangers, great periplus and, mainly, the great sociopolitical and economic objectives, bringing an impossible but desired greatness to a world rather given as bourgeois and capitalist, low and decaying". Moreover, Silviano Santiago reminds us that the postmodern condition is reformist in the eyes of the revolutionaries, irrational and anarchical to the illuminists, only modernizing to the moderns, "but in its own eyes, postmodernity is antitotalitarian, i.e. democratically fragmented, and it is useful to sharpen our intelligence about what is heterogeneous, marginal, sidelined, daily, so that historical reason brings up new objects of study". By refusing the "small narratives", Postman refuses the postmodern condition and gives Education a conservative solution, avoiding, thus, one of the main challenges in Education: facing the open consequences of its narrativity.

1. Foretale

This paper aims to point out elements able to promote a reflection on whether educational theory, at least some of its current representatives (which can be thought to be emblematic for the reasons we'll mention below), should rely on a "master" narrative to be legitimated or guided in a postmodern age marked precisely, according to Jean-François Lyotard, by the disbelief in metanarratives [1]; or, dispartely, whether educational theory wouldn't be allowed or even compelled to look for nonmetanarrative goals or grounds. The latter alternative can rely, as we believe, on the way narrative and its "nonmetalization" is seen and inserted in the theory.

2. The end of narrative and its double menace

First of all, we'll assume that what we call here "master" narratives are in a sufficient extent similar to Lyotard's description of metanarrative. Second, such a (postmodern) condition, of course, is all but new, though it can be said that we live today the unfolding of most of Lyotard's (accurate) predictions.



This perspective still provides us a powerful set of critical issues to evaluate the relevance of the educational discourse like the one held by Neil Postman on our present – and, in several ways, on our future – in "The End of Education" [2]. We'll focus on the narrative issue for this brief paper, which probably should be endless.

A rather obvious or direct link between the two opposed theoretical uses of narrative can be drawn, since each one seems to be object of the other's critique: one for suggesting a metanarrative as a goal (a goal-end) and thus still being modern, the other for being a postmodern thought, one of the kind Postman labels the "metaphysics of meaninglessness", like the philosophies of deconstruction [3]. But there also is a not so apparent, explicit or undeniable relation of narrative with the idea of two ends (the end of education (Postman) and the end of great narratives itself (Lyotard)). In both discourses about the end there is a menace or/and a chance: the endlessness of narrativity. This endlessness doesn't mean the end of all narrative, neither the meaninglessness of "postmodern" theory in the educational field. We'll try to sketch some "final" lines to begin an argumentation about it. But let us take a closer look at Postman's arguments first.

Postman's main argument about the "end" of education - in the double sense of goal and of a limit (a third sense is embedded: without a goal, education dies) - is the need for american educators to inculcate back in the students the lacking spirit and greatness that can be drawn from the "American Credo". This proposition could be extended to all claims for national or great narratives able to unite, inspire and guide the educational actors, syllabuses and policies. Postman's thesis comes as a reinforcement as well as a confessed conservative revision of his earlier work, "Teaching as a subversive activity" [4]. Most "subversive" imperatives from 1967 remain up to date: questioning prior to readymade answers in the classroom, adaption to change as a surviving strategy, the teacher's role as a "crap detector", among others. The exception is the role and treatment given to narrative: the gods society believes in, craves for, are narrative(s). The only alternative is choosing our gods among such narratives. The classroom becomes then a place to resist the outside gods and to recite the story of the inspiring ones: the Great American "Experiment" (and its heroes: Lincoln, Jefferson, etc.), the creation of a Common Public, the Great Liberal Democracy, School as a Civilizing space. Let's say, a Collectively Shared Narrative. The unwanted gods are: Consumerism, Technology, Multiculturalism, Insignificance (deconstructive philosophies), Disorder (narratives always point out an order).

3. When should criticism end? Alternatives

Postman does not make clear when the teacher's and the student's questioning should stop when the issue is... "great narratives". Or "metanarratives". It is through it, though, that modern times created "its great heroes, great dangers, great periplexity and, mainly, the great sociopolitical and economic objectives, bringing an impossible but desired greatness to a world rather given as bourgeois and capitalist, low and decaying" [5]. Moreover, Silvano Santiago reminds us that the postmodern condition is reformist in the eyes of the revolutionaries, irrational and anarchical to the illuminists, only modernizing to the moderns, "but in its own eyes, postmodernity is antitotalitarian, i.e. democratically fragmented, and it is useful to sharpen our intelligence about what is heterogeneous, marginal, sidelined, daily, so that historical reason brings up new objects of study" [6].

Note that "historical reason" is a very interesting formula used by Santiago here: reason is historical, thus narrative and despite sharing its name with rationalism, the latter is fragmented, externalized, marginalized as the "creation of its objects of study" (we are thinking, for example, about educational syllabuses and the presence of a master national or public narrative prescribed by Postman) indicates there is a fading of predetermined essences, ratios or universal reasons to establish the components of educational narrative. The postmodern condition doesn't refer to a chronological time but to the fact that the alternatives can/should no longer be thought through the dichotomic alternatives, since a great amount of works in many fields of study (and its "new objects") blurs the series of divisions that constitute modern rationality (reason/language, subject/object, science/society, nature/culture, representation/reality, etc.), the autonomy of the subject and the correlative avatars of these modern features in educational theory (the educational syllabus as a representation of an external reality, criticism as a neutral point outside hegemonic discourse, language as a communicative tool or as a social ascension asset, etc.) [7].

By refusing the "small narratives" and by returning to the modern model, isn't Postman refusing the postmodern condition and giving Education a conservative solution, avoiding, thus, one of the main challenges in Education: facing the open consequences of its narrativity? To make ourselves clearer,



we'll have to outline a definition of a concept that escapes to conceptualization or, rather, that is at work when one intends to define the concept of concept itself. Narrativity gathers together the concept and, simultaneously, de-limits the its historicity and aperture.

4. Narrativity and the (poetic) endlessness of education

Let us recount our argument plotted against Postman's narrative (the story that tells us we need greater, unifying narratives): it is a single but emblematic narrative of a modern imperative reassumed as if the postmodern condition described above was a miscarriage of the modern project. In Postman's specific case, *The end of education* (1998), a future unfolding of *Teaching as a subversive activity* (1967), comes as a return of/to metanarratives, or, as says the teller at the beginning of *The end of education*, as a necessary complement of the subversivity from 1967. The modern, subversive power present then demanded a new way of teaching, telling (a further example is Donald Finkel's *Teaching with your mouth shut* [8]: the narrative teaching tradition lies on a knowledge transmission model, a strong, old and delusive intent to *master* the educational narrative), opening the syllabuses to new unfoldings. Most of these imperatives are not denied thirty years later, but this crucial difference is introduced, in the very name of the impossible externality of narrative. What could be described as the power of a subversive narrativity ended thus in the empowerment of one single master narrative, shaded with a death sentence for education. The apocalyptic discourse (the danger of a collective end that usually moves the modern narratives) implies, of course, a salvation tone, to remind Jacques Derrida's words [9], a greater outcome that arrives here as an aggrandized narrative. So the historical reason or the historicity of reason is erased when it comes to the saviour narrative. Its narrativity is obliterated.

There is no simple definition of narrativity, first because it is non-finite and it lies at the roots of the non-finiton of narratives. Could we "tell" it? H. Porter Habbot reminds, though, us that even if "it has become a contested term, 'narrativity' is still commonly used in two senses: in a fixed sense as the 'narrativeness' of narrative and in a scalar sense as the 'narrativeness' of a narrative, the one applied generally to the concept of narrative, the other applied comparatively to particular narratives" [10]. We'll take for granted that the first sense is more interesting to discuss educational theory in a general way. It enfolds supplementary non-narrative elements which, nevertheless, do not come out of narrative. Narrativity is, thus, not understood here as a pacific or resigned comprehension of discourse, theory or practice that simply can't be but narrative. Galen Strawson already warned us about how fashionable it is to claim narrative any psychological or ethical issue: "As for Narrativity, it is in the sphere of ethics more of an affliction or a bad habit than a prerequisite of a good life" [11]. Narrative is certainly a habit, most often a bad one. In fact it constitutes or gives shape to most forms of cultural *habit*, *habitus* or *ethos*. When Strawson hollows life's non-narrative events buried in this craving for unity or identity embedded in the "narrativization" of psyche and ethics, he tries to denounces a naive conscience over the importance of narrative. But *narrativity* here is taken for narrative in general, when it should be seen, in our view, in a radically different way: exactly as the possibility of demarcation from habit in narrative, of narrative. It certainly impels us, on the other hand, to tell. The power of narrativity is, then, ambivalent, ambiguous, unpeaceful. It certainly confronts metanarrativity as well as narrativization while, simultaneously, allows it.

We'll end this paper with a word on a traditional metatext full of metanarratives, that in which Postman prescribes the old American master story: the syllabus. Tomaz Tadeu da Silva offers a new perspective on it by comparing it to a (revalorised) fetish. He highlights it both as a battling representational field, as well as a possible object of desire, i.e., the intersection of a political and a poetical endeavour. On the one hand, "there is no identity nor alterity outside representation. The curriculum [syllabus] is, there, at the very intersection between power and representation, a local of identity and alterity production. There, precisely, like knowledge, it becomes a field of battle *around* representation" [12] (our italics). On the other hand, as a fetish, it becomes a sign of postmodern times, when "it gets hard to maintain not only the old distinctions between nature and culture, science and society, technique and politics, but above all the distinctions between the human and the non-human" [13]. On this latter fading border, education is at stake. Politically but, above all, poetically, an ongoing and forthcoming task.

Education is endless, it endlessly retells its ends, its goals and its deaths.



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