



Interruption, Suspension, and Sustaining: Catalysts for Change in Future Education after Covid-19

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Abstract

The outbreak of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic forced educators¹ to encounter the world in a most interrupted way possible. Schools were closed, online teaching became the only way to carry on education. Teachers had no choice but to dialogue with real² and the reality³. I argue that the challenging encounter with Covid-19 exposed the complex relationships between education and a world in a liminal stage.⁴ The pandemic is also doing a significant service in rehabilitating these relationships, opening up an extraordinary opportunity for fruitful dialogue between education and the real world. My argument is based on my personal working experience as a teacher and teachers of teachers of Hebrew as a second additional language, prior to and during the pandemic. I examine their engagement with the innovative ideas that I present in *IVRIKAL*. My experience is described from the prospective of Biesta's three domains of teachers' work: interruption, suspension and sustaining.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, *IVRIKAL*, teachers' work

1. Vignette

Education is "uncoercive rearrangement of desires" (Spivak in Biesta 2017, p.16):

Becoming a vice-principle of Hebrew in one of the largest Jewish high schools in North America was a dream come true for me. While I was aware of the major challenges ahead of me when I accepted the job, I was dismayed to find how irrelevant and outdated the Hebrew curriculum was to students' life. Teachers were deeply frustrated with the lack of interest of their students. To my despair, my intentions to update the curriculum with authentic teaching material and to acquaint teachers with newer teaching approaches were met with resistance. The teachers, who overall had good intentions of maintaining high standards of learning, were intimidated by the idea of exploring new material and teaching approaches. They also struggled with the expectation that they would have to integrate technology into their teaching.

*Freud's Reality Principle suggests three options of responding to resistance: push hard to overcome resistance, withdraw from the resistance and staying in a middle ground (Biesta 2017 YouTube), My first response to the teacher's resistance was to push hard. I was devastated (not to say angry) by teachers' lack of enthusiasm to get familiar with new concepts and their refusal to dialogue with the reality of a new era. After reflection, I realized that to make a change, I should also be open to dialogue, in a (Biesta, 2017) genuine and nonjudgmental way with teachers, in order to better understand their struggles. I needed to find a way to provide them with a support system. At that time, I was unfamiliar with Biesta's three domains of the educational work and its terminology. However, I realized that teachers' negative encounter with technology and progressive teaching concepts were due to lack of time, space and resources that could enable them "self-expression encounters limits, interruptions, responses all have the quality of the frustration..." (Biesta, 2017, p.15). By that to maintain an ongoing dialog with future interruptions of developments and changes, which are part of today's liminal era. This understanding led me to try to find a way in which teachers of Hebrew will be able to become acquainted with and practice themes of progressive language teaching, a teaching/learning space that will provide teachers with a holistic solution for ongoing communication with the real and reality of today's world. I developed an online learning space/site—*IVRIKAL*, that offers teachers authentic teaching material, professional guidelines for*

¹ In this paper I alternate between the term *educators* and *teachers*. I use the term *educators* when I refer generally to teachers, and the term *teachers* when I refer to teachers of Hebrew

² Real – technology and progressive teaching approaches

³ Reality - as the new world of digitalization and constant changes

⁴ By liminal stage I mean a world that went through technology revolution and now at the beginning of the artificial intelligent revolution



teaching an additional language, and, at the same time, presents them with new teaching ideas and digital tools.

I developed a model that accommodates a system of education that is working with real life: nonlinear or standardised but organic, creative, and diverse, life that is creative and diverse (Media, 2021). I insisted on a non-linear, thematic curriculum for teaching Hebrew that, unlike a book, will be dynamic (meaning it can be updated and revised on a regular basis) and flexible (allows shifting between proficiency levels), wide material choices, exploring teaching approaches that allow students' autonomy (e.g., PBL⁵). Through IVRIKAL teachers are given examples of digital tools and suggestions for creative lesson plans and existential assignments.

2. Interruption: Education encounters a new era

"School is probably the least responsive evolving institution in today's society, clinging to the factory model instead of the thinking model" (Gregory & Kaufeldt, 2015 p.146).

During the last thirty years, since personal computers became a common item in our world and the era of digitalization began, the educational system and educators have struggled with technology and with the new concepts it introduces. The developments of advanced technology and digitalization were a disruptive interruption to education from the get-go. Although there is ongoing interaction between education and digitalization, the encounter between the two remained within the stage of *interruption*. Gert Biesta defines an *interruption* – as an experience of a resistance to an initiative (Biesta 2017). Based on Freud's *The Reality Principle*, people might respond in one of three possible ways: a. push hard to overcome the resistance b. withdraw from the intention and c. staying on a middle ground, by having an existential type of dialogue (Freud in Biesta the rediscovery of teaching 2017, p14).

Biesta suggests that to respond in a Grown-Up way, one must dialogue in an existential manner with the source of interruption and must find a middle ground in which a lifelong dialogue takes place. To reach a phase in which we maintain an ongoing dialogue with the interruption- a **sustenance**, we should first have a chance for **suspension**- a "time and space for meeting, considering and transforming our desires and for practicing *Grown-Up Ness*" (*The Beautiful Risk of Education* | Gert Biesta, 2017). Future educational work, argues Biesta, should be based on the three domains of *interruption*, *suspension*, and *sustenance*, as the educational task is "to put our desires in dialogue with the world" (*The Beautiful Risk of Education* | Gert Biesta, n.d.). Biesta's idea of future education is one that is based on the three domains of *interruption*, *suspension*, and *sustenance*, its main task (and challenge) is to teach students how to live in the world in a Grown-Up way.

Looking at the evolution of the relationships between education with "*the real and reality*" from Biesta's three domains of education, can provide a better understanding of why these relationships remained trapped in the interruption phase. I suggest that without having the chance of experiencing a necessary *suspension*, the education system was unable to reach a middle ground. A middle ground – a place and time to come to terms with the new and rapid developments and to practice a dialogue with them and with the related concepts.

Prior to covid 19, teachers who I worked with tended to be passive learners when it came to technology. However, during Covid-19, teachers could not afford the "luxury" of being passive learners, they had to survive, they were forced to teach virtually. They became engaged and eager to gain relevant knowledge and skills.

3. Suspension: The outbreak of Covid-19

"Where we try, we fail, we try again... and we fail better (Samuel Beckett in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* | Gert Biesta, 2017)

Like other social systems, the system of education was interrupted with the invasion of technology. From a practical perspective, the systemic challenges of education with the new developments were revolved around learning, operating, and technology integration. The conceptual aspects presented the educational system with more complex issues. This is due to the profoundly different characteristics of the old-fashioned and rigorous aesthetics of traditional education in comparison to those of the new era: innovation, rapid changes, and creativity. In fact, as soon as we enter a school, it feels like going back in

⁵ Project Based Learning



time. Hallways and classrooms look exactly like they used to be generations ago, while everything surrounding schools has changed drastically.

The outbreak of Covid-19 brings to the surface the complexity of the relationships between Education and the developments of the new era, from both practical and conceptual aspects. In many ways the educational system is not able to advance these relationships past the resistance stage which is part of the phase of encountering an interruption. Although the encounter with the Covid-19 pandemic was, by itself, an additional and painful interruption, it was helpful in moving education towards the *suspension* phase in its relationships with the new world of technology. Ironically, the Covid-19 situation put educators in a survival mode leaving them with no option to withdraw. Educators were forced to interact intensively with technology daily, for a period of over a year—a year in which educators were able to deal with the difficulties they are experiencing, and with their resistant interaction to the invasion of technology. They were able to practice dialoging with technology and with failing in their attempts. In other words, they were able to practice Grow-Up-Ness and to “fail better”.

In addition to dealing with fear of failure, the pandemic forced educators to learn while being present in the moment, which is vital component of successful learning: “There must be attending; there must be noticing; at once, there must be a reflective turning back to the stream of consciousness—the stream that contains our perceptions, our reflections, yes, and our ideas” (Greene, 1978, p.182).

It is important to point out that the virtual world is a world of its own that co-exists with the “actual” world in which we are living. In Alfred Schutz’ discussion about “multiple realities – different “worlds”, he speaks about the different experiences which distinguish one world from another by the cognitive style or the mode of attention peculiar to each one (Greene, 1978) “Moving from one world to another requires a shock experience, which Kierkegaard explains as a radical modification in the tension of our consciousness, founded in a different attention a la vie”(Kierkegaard in Greene, 1978, p173). “These shocks, these shifts of attention, make it possible to see from different standpoints; they stimulate the “wide-awakeness” so essential to critical awareness, most particularly when they involve a move to the imaginary-away from the mundane” (Greene, 2017, p.173).

Although it is a virtual world, the digital world has its own specific ways of operating as well as a language and culture of its own. Like in the “real world” there is a learning gap between the formal knowledge – the “book knowledge” and the informal knowledge. The unformulated knowledge – the “*tacit knowledge*”, as Michael Polanyi called it, is most critical for learning as it is what provides us with the original understanding of experience (Greene, 2017, p.60). For teachers who, for the most part, are not “*digital citizens*”⁶, experiencing the digital world during Covid-19 in such intensive ways can be compared to taking part in an immersion program to learn a new language, a typically intense intellectual and emotional experience.

Engaging with the digital world gave teachers the opportunity of learning new structures as well as new teaching concepts and tools. Unlike experiences in the past, learning during Covid-19, was an existential learning, “learning to” in oppose to “learning about”. *Existential learning*, according to Biesta, is a learning that occurs in a particular way, in which we meet the world and ourselves through the subject we learn (*The Beautiful Risk of Education* | Gert Biesta, 2017)

At the beginning of the Pandemic, teachers were panicking. They had to equip themselves as soon as possible with digitalization and to apply it the very next day. The first months of the pandemic resonates with what Biesta calls **time of shopping** (*The Beautiful Risk of Education* | Gert Biesta, 2017). Teachers searched for as many digital tools they could find, as fast as possible. This shopping period, however, was only partly beneficial, as teachers did not always know how to discern between tools that have an added pedagogical value vs. tools that offer nothing new or useful.

4. Sustenance: Getting a grasp on innovation

There is a typical misconception about innovation and technology, that one always depends on the other. The fact that in conferences of education, lectures, and workshops on the topic of education in the 21st century is for the most part technology related, fossilizing this misconception. I find that the mythic

⁶ “*digital citizens*” – As defined by Karen Mossberger one of the authors of *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation*, digital citizens are “those who use the internet regularly and effectively.” (Wikipedia)



anecdote about how the USA government spent millions in efforts to develop a pen that would work in space while the Russians, simply used a pencil, illustrates well the difference between technology and innovation.

The process of adopting new ways of thinking is not an easy task as it conflicts with previous knowledge and skills. What is even more challenging is at times, we might be under the impression that we have indeed adopted a new way, while, in truth, we are still in the process. “we may see ourselves as gradually ordering our experience and refining our skills or our capacities against the background of those funded meanings. New understanding and new knowledge, after all, are encountered against what was understood and known before” (Greene, 1978, p.61). A good example from the educational world of what we might have been assumed to be innovative, but it is not at all, is the development of digital textbooks, which were simply books transformed as they were to a digital version, offering no new ideas or new pedagogic value.

The process of transitioning from the traditional to the innovational mode of thinking is not simple. Covid-19 was a “dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action” (Dewey in Biesta, 2017, p.65). The choice for a specific line of action should be understood as “hitting in imagination upon an object which furnishes an adequate stimulus to the recovery of overt action” (Dewey in Biesta, 2009 ,p.65). ” As teachers explore different way of teaching, the experience of going through an *aesthetic experience* is a longer process. Dewey defines the *aesthetic experience* as an “*experience in its integrity* ... experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience” (Greene, 1978, p.171). The *aesthetic experience* helps in reaching an “imaginative ordering and reordering of meanings” (Greene, 1978, p.171). We need to be able to think in an innovative way, in a way which is different from how we used to think. Reaching an imaginative ordering enables us to assimilate the present to the past as well as to brings about some reconstruction of that past” (Greene, 1978, p.171).

Life in general, can be looked at as a continuing *aesthetic experience*, not only a form of education. Therefore, after dedicating almost six years to the development of an innovative - multidimensional online teaching space, I am still in the mist of an *aesthetic experience* towards developing an online teaching space that is entirely innovative. An *aesthetic experience* is a transformative experience that advances us towards the creation of a new form or a reform of an idea. It is a process in which we challenge our previous knowledge and understanding to gain new insights (Greene, 1978).

While educators had a valuable *aesthetic experience* during Covid-19, it was only the jump-start of a long process. During the learning of a new language, learners experience a significant gap from the time of *input*, in which the learner learns new vocabulary and grammatical concepts to the point of producing a successful output, *output*, the correct use of the language with no assistance, and in unfamiliar contexts. Therefore, although educators learned new skills and concepts during the pandemic, it is only the beginning of this process. Educators must develop their creativity in the use of the new technology, to a point in which they can apply “new forms of learning and doing” (Greene, 1978, p.80). To successfully progress with this task, to sustain a productive relationship with reality, education and educators should step away from the old aesthetics, of standardized and moralized pedagogy and adopt aesthetics that enhances existential learning, creativity, and autonomy (for both teachers and students).

When I introduced teachers to new digital tools, they asked me many questions about tracking students’ work, not for the purpose of tracking students’ understanding and progress but rather to know if they completed given assignments. In other words, teachers were more concerned with collecting data for the purpose of “policing” then for the purpose of gaining new knowledge.

5. Sustenance: Getting a grasp on autonomy

“The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise— with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country. (Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress,” December 1, 1862) in Gayle& Kaufeldt p147

With the development of the internet, free access to information and technology massive integration in every life, 21st century skills for students. What about teachers’ skills? Today’s teachers also need an updated skill set. As educators speak about student autonomy, it is vital to ensure teacher autonomy as well. This, to empower teachers to become “In professional models the producer not only services a need, but also defines it.” (Biesta, 2006, p.21)



In an era in which students have access to a wide range of learning resources, outside of school, (e.g., Kaha Academy videos⁷) schoolteachers' work became more challenging. It requires of teachers not only to have a profound knowledge of the subject they are teaching, but also to bring an added value to the material. Dewey compares teachers to sellers as they need to "sell" students interests in what they, the teachers, desire to teach. Unfortunately, not once, teachers stand in front of students who show no interest in buying what is being offered. (Dewey in Biesta 2017 P.24).

When students are not interested in "buying the knowledge" that teachers are trying to sell, they are simply withdrawing from the learning. In other words, they are reluctant to take responsibility for their learning. Greene argues that learning takes place when they take responsibility, which can only happen if students are given autonomy: "...once a teacher acknowledges that learning takes place only when a learner takes responsibility for his or her own learning. Once a teacher acknowledges the role of the student's resolute will, that teacher then is positing and encouraging the autonomy of each student in class" (Greene, in Hancock, 2020). For teachers to become effective teachers, in order to encourage students towards active interpretations – a rejection of a just passive taking, to conduct active learning and making of meaning (Greene, in Hancock, 2020). the focus should be more on the experience—the activity rather than on the learning (Biesta, 2017). From a teacher's work aspect, shifting the focus from learning onto experiences and activities translates to extending students' autonomy, to creating existential type assignments and projects and to applying creativity in designing these activities.

This type of teaching approach is what is needed to be "reconciled with the requirements of personal growth and futuring and with the requirements of critical thought" Green p80 and "to create men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done—men and women who are creative, inventive, and discovers"-who have minds which "can be critical, can verify, and not accept everything they are offered." (Greene, 1978). What is needed is "Arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in the world in a Grown- Up way" and to teach students to make the question of "is what desire is desirable" and avoid telling them what they need to desire (The Beautiful Risk of Education | Gert Biesta, n.d.).

However, teachers themselves are lacking autonomy in their work (being part of a standardized and moralized system). They tend to have a hard time with both stepping away from the professional standards to which they are accustomed: "It appears to me, however, that this kind of pedagogy only becomes meaningful when those who engage in it choose themselves as responsive to norms that go beyond purely professional standards." (Greene, 1978). And some that are simply not aware: "... perhaps there are teachers who think they have done a good day's teaching irrespective of what people have learned. There is the same exact equation between teaching and learning that there is between selling and buying. (Dewey in Biesta, 2017, P.24).

Therefore it is necessary to find a way in which teachers can have more autonomy, with respect to the schools' goals and values: "...only a teacher who is present to her or himself, who has achieved some personal autonomy can take the risks required to move others to choose themselves" (Greene, in Hancock, 2020).

My decision to develop a nonlinear curriculum model was based on two main reasons: my belief that a progressive education should reflect and dialogue with real life – nonlinear life in a nonlinear world, and my belief in teacher- student autonomy. I did not realize that by presenting teachers with a nonlinear frame, I was challenging teachers with creativity.

6. Sustenance: Getting a grasp on creativity

Along with technology developments, there is more integration of artistic aesthetics, as educators became aware of the added value artistic aesthetics has on the learning process, as it introduces to the learners concepts of development, coherence, and consummations (Greene, 1978). Teachers are trying to invest in the learning environment and in the visuality of teaching material.

⁷ Kaha Academy – "is an American non-profit educational organization created in 2006 by Sal Khan, with the goal of creating a set of online tools that help educate students. The organization produces short lessons in the form of videos. Its website also includes supplementary practice exercises and materials for educators". (Wikipedia)



However, it is important to remember, that although the integration of artistic aesthetics in education is a positive direction, it is also holding a risk. Both Dewey and Sartre point out the risk of fixity, in preserving the work of art, as simply aesthetic experience. Dewey points out that art is a form of reconstruction of the past in light of the present and Sartre referred to art as **the reconstruction of the present in the light of future** (Greene, 1978). In both cases there is a clear emphasis on the aesthetic experiences as a stimulating experience that manifest new perspectives. An increase in the engagement with technology during Covid-19, and the need to make an extra effort in engaging students over Zoom classes, encourages and forces teachers to focus even more on developing creative teaching material with emphasis on artistic aesthetics.

As teachers became more equipped with the means of creating for themselves digital teaching material, they began to invest in creating material with a more sophisticated visuality. It is gratifying to see that teachers gained technological skills and awareness in ways of presenting new knowledge to students. With the outbreak of the pandemic, teachers of Hebrew were quick to collaborate with each other. Hebrew teachers from all over the world collaborated through social media, sharing sources of teaching materials and as well as work that they have created. As learners themselves, teachers had access to a wide range of resources, technology, and ideas which allowed them to experience the new learning according to their individual capacity and learning pace, as well as to begin forming what Greene call an *"authentic speaking"* (Greene, 1978).

An innovational teaching approach is one that encourages teachers towards demonstrating aesthetic experiences, which will enhance students' engagement, reflection and encourage new perspectives and ideas.

7. Summary

"We may not be able to predict the future, but we can help to shape it" (Robinson in Media, 2021)

The Covid-19 interruption and the encounter education had with the authenticity of modern life led to a better understanding of the nature of future life. It is an opportunity for the educational system and educators to utilize these new understandings towards refining over-all purposes that will affect the contents and the ways of teaching. (Greene, 1978) The objectives should be philosophical and practical. They should provide teachers with an updated, rethought system so that it will accommodate the current reality in which we live in, as well as looking bravely toward an unknowable future.

In speaking about the invasion of technology into modern life, Dewey points out that beside the concrete changes, it will also affect the world conceptually: "an invasion by ways of thinking as well, ways of explaining, yes, of mystifying." (Dewey in Greene (Dewey in Greene, 1978, p 4) To stay relevant and effective in today's world and to become an influential system in shaping the future world, the education system and educators ought to demonstrate Grown -Up-Ness in order to maintain an ongoing philosophical and concrete dialogue, with continuing changes and developments.

While Covid-19 provided educators with the needed *suspension* for practicing with technology, they still need to work on changing thinking models to which they are accustomed. Unlike the old aesthetics of education, which promoted and fostered standardization and moralization, a refined aesthetics toward future education should consist of creativity and autonomy. Successful citizens of the tomorrow's world – *"the untouchables"* – the successful people, those who earn well and hold key roles in society, will be required to have the skill of imagination: "Those who have the ability to imagine new services and new opportunities and new ways to recruit work ... are the new Untouchables. Those with the imagination to invent smarter ways to do old jobs, energy-saving ways to provide new services, new ways to attract old customers or new ways to combine existing technologies will thrive" (Friedman in Media, 2021,p.8).

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