

The Beautiful Future of Literary Education

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Abstract

In *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013) Gert J.J. Biesta describes how Western educational systems are increasingly becoming a landscape of control and assessment; a development produced by “a desire to make education strong, secure, predictable and risk-free”. Against this strong view, Biesta argues for “weak” one, focusing the unpredictable, the unknown: “the risk”. Education, Biesta emphasizes, isn’t only qualification and socialization, but also subjectification: an event of recognition and responsibility in relation to the Other. Such events are crucial to the creation of true citizenship, but are suppressed in the dominant educational views and practices, where teaching is conceptualized as a process aimed at producing something given beforehand. Biesta calls for a weaker attitude, where the risk of education is embraced as a beautiful one, and where teaching is set forth as “the giving of a gift the teacher doesn’t possess”. What part, then, can the reading of fictional narratives in education play, if you accept Biesta’s argument? On the basis of the educational implications of the concept of ‘gap’ we discuss the question of why, and how reading and discussing literature can make room for events of recognition and responsibility in the classroom, and thus counterbalance current tendencies of harsh instrumentalization. To this end, our ambition is to outline didactic perspectives and teaching practices consciously oriented towards a beautiful, riskful future of literary education.

Keywords: Educational philosophy, Literary education, Subjectification, Fictional narrativity;

1. Introduction

In *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2013), Gert J.J. Biesta describes contemporary Western education systems as a landscape of control and assessment, produced by “a desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free”. Against this “strong” view, Biesta argues for a “weak” one, focusing the unpredictable, the unknown – i.e. the *risk* – as a primary feature of an education worthy of its name. In the following we will examine the whys and hows of promoting such a weaker attitude in the education of literature. What does it actually mean, when teaching literature, to think and do “education without the possession of a truth about what the human subject is or should become”? [1] Biesta’s argument for weakness and risk as the fundamentals of what we should be doing in school is based on a radical definition of education not as a process where the teacher is simply trying to produce something given beforehand, but as an *open* activity, that “has to be understood in terms of responsibility for the ‘coming into the world’ of unique, singular beings, and a responsibility for the world as a world of plurality and difference” [2]. Education, then, is something more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills (*qualification*) and becoming part of established ways of being and doing (*socialization*). Education should also be oriented towards *subjectification*, i.e. an ego-interruptive event of recognition and responsibility. Such events, where someone makes an appeal to me, singles me out in my uniqueness, and makes me ethically responsible to the Other one before me, are according to Biesta crucial to the construction of true citizenship. However, in the dominant measuring and assessing practices of today’s ‘learning industry’, these events of becoming a responsible subject are structurally suppressed. [3]

What part, then, can the reading of fictional narratives in education play, if we accept Biesta’s argument? What characteristics of literature need to be accentuated, and what practices of teaching literature are adequate for paving the way for events of recognition and responsibility in the classroom? Our ambition in the following is to approach these questions in terms of *teaching literature in the gap*.

2. Teaching in the gap

Recent empirical studies in the field of literary education in our immediate context, Swedish L1 education for teenagers and onwards, are giving witness to a frustration among teachers and students as to the space and time allotted to reading literature in compulsory education. Or rather, the conditions are such that they, in governing what teachers should emphasize, leave the fundamental

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question of why and how literature really matters in oblivion. For centuries the reading of literature has been regarded as a pillar stone of being learned and educated, and therefore as an essential part of all educational systems. Schools in the west have today, under the influence of managerial systems such as NPM, been shaped into a mold for measuring quality in education which undermines this tradition [4]. Literary education is in itself a challenging field, but the task has not been facilitated by the land laid with charts of assessment, where the specific educational aspects of the reading of literature as a specific experience tends to be lost along the way.

Our focus here is on the actual reading of and reflection on literary texts. Essentially, we propose an attitude to teaching and to fictional narratives which we believe could affirm specific characteristics of the school subject literature. The image of teaching in the gap counteracts the idea of reaching specific, measurable goals, without discarding the teacher's active and determined role. It also emphasizes subjectification as an educational aim of a much more indefinite, but crucial nature. In this perspective, we conceive literary education to be about embracing the beautiful risk of reading literature as a means of subjectifying empowerment, as well as about the teaching of what reading literature can be without resorting to given answers, making inconclusiveness an educational aim in itself.

To speak of teaching literature in the gap is an attempt to provide an answer to the questions above by outlining an educational frame of mind. The gap could be described as a sort of educational interspace or middle-ground in both the reading practice and when teaching literature – and taking the former into account when practicing the latter. *Minding* the gap doesn't necessarily mean leaving the gap undisturbed or indicate a practice where the teacher refrains from interfering or interacting with the students' responses to a specific literary text. There is a point to be made here, that literary education needs to strike a balance between being open to a wide spectrum of individual readings, and having the ambition to show how to read in a respectful and socially constructive way.

Certainly, there is a tradition in literary studies, most explicitly put to the fore by reception theorists like Wolfgang Iser, paying attention to gaps *in* literary texts. According to Iser such indeterminacies are in fact the text's most important contribution to the literary interaction: "The gaps or structured blanks [...] function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves, because they stimulate the process of ideation to be formed by the reader on terms set by the text" [5]. Teaching literature in the gap deals with these kinds of gaps and embrace *them* and their role in the receptional process, rather than the results of filling them in accordance with the students' individual readings. The overall incentive is the urge to close gaps, at all or prematurely, to be handled as part of the organic process of understanding and taking responsibility for this understanding – as an understanding *of* something. This teaching in the gap is, then, a teaching in the *reading* of literature as a responsive activity of determination, of filling in blanks, as well as one of paying respect, both attentively and ethically, to what is read.

3. Literature as utterance

A teaching of literature in the gap needs thus to focus on the *relation* between the fictional text and the reader, a relation which in reception studies traditionally has been conceptualized as a phenomenological and spatial one. The generally used distinction in this respect has to do with the fictional world described and the textual description of it. When the reader wholly focuses and is emotionally absorbed in the fictional world, the space of the reading situation is diminished, or even obliterated. And, on the other hand, in modes of reading analyzing formal features, or interpreting the text in critical-theoretical perspectives, the spatiality of the reading situation is enforced.

Concerning the teaching of literature in secondary school and at the universities, this spatiality of reading has always been at the core of the discussion, not in the least in the USA, where influential theorists like Louise Rosenblatt and Judith Langer describe the interaction between reader and text as a spatio-temporal process, where emotional engagement is constituted by enchantment and immersion, and analysis and critical reflection take place on the basis of distance [6]. For these theorists, the "aporia of reading" described by J. Hillis Miller is given: "Combining these two modes of reading in one act is difficult, perhaps impossible, since each inhibits and forbids the other. How can you give yourself wholeheartedly to a literary work [...] and at the same time distance yourself from it, regard it with suspicion, and take it apart to see what makes it tick?" [7]

In her influential argument for the significant contribution the study of literature can make to a political-democratic education, Martha Nussbaum implicitly accepts the distinction discussed above. Ours is a different path. In contrast to Nussbaum's claim that narrative fiction nurtures empathic capacities in the reader through identificatory perspective-taking [8], our proposal relies on the (less colonial) idea of the societal value of individuals being liable for their own singular responsibility in relation to

addressing Others – events which are dependent on a distance of a thoroughly different kind than the established notion of it.

Our argument relies on the naïve assumption that a literary text can be recognized as an *utterance*, constituted by being uttered by someone, and directed to someone, demanding and presupposing some kind of active response. This enactment of the text as speech and communication creates a distance or gap in the reading situation which is not made up of detachment and suspicion, but of engaging responsibility to the text as the addressing Other.

A teacher who consciously works towards the ‘utteranceness’ of a narrative to appear when discussing it with students can thus be said to make space in the classroom for the events of educational subjectification Biesta is calling for, these events where someone makes an appeal to me and singles me out in my uniqueness, making me ethically responsible to the Other one addressing me. The fact that we are dealing with fiction, and not ‘real life’, makes, of course, the events in question particularly interesting as *educational* ones. Practically, this activation in and through the gap can be promoted through quite simple speech maneuvers on behalf of the teacher. An example is to instead of asking questions about *what* or *how* something happens in a narrative, initiate a receptional discourse focusing on *why*: “*Why* does the story begin/end in this way (and not in another)?”; “*Why* is it set in this place and time (and not in another one)?”; “*Why* is the protagonist characterized in this way (and not in another)?” “*Why* is the focalization made in this way (and not in another)?” What this kind of alternative *talking about narratives* actually has power to do is to performatively transform the textual matter of facts (whether it has to do with form or content) to rhetorical *doings* and *choices*, a process of *arti(f)action* which ultimately gives the text agency as an utterance.

3. Conclusions

The most fundamental question suppressed by today’s educational technology, aiming towards a perfect match between input and output, is, Biesta remarks, the question of what education is ultimately for: “The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free is an attempt to wish away the fact that at the end of the day education should aim to make itself dispensable [...] which means that education necessarily needs to have an orientation toward the freedom and independence of those being educated” [10]. We would like to suggest that literary education has the potential, when not solely oriented toward qualification and socialization, to pave the way for a conception of ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ along the lines of what we as humans ethically demand and rely on from each other. Teaching literature in the gap is a way to, in the classroom, orchestrate freedom and independence as something *relational* and *responsible* – an orchestration dependent on events of *subjectification* which can only take place where there *is* place, or rather, where this is a *gap* of responsiveness between the ‘me’ of the student and the ‘you’ of the Other. It is in this gap the beautiful future of literary education is to be found.

References

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