

From Schools to Learning Environments: The Dark Side of Being Exceptional

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Schools and classrooms, as well as the work place and the Internet, are considered today as learning environments. People are regarded as learners and the main target of school education has become 'learning' pupils and students how to learn. The roles of teachers and lecturers are redefined as instructors, designers of (powerful) learning environments and facilitators or coaches of learning processes. The aim of this paper is to argue that the current self-understanding in terms of learning environments is not merely about a renewal of our vocabulary, but an indication of a far more general transformation of the world of education. It is argued that the current self-understanding in terms of 'learning environments' and 'learners' indicates a shift in our experience of time and place; a shift from (modern) historical self-understanding towards (post-modern) environmental self-understanding. The essay draws upon Foucauldian concepts in order to map the modern organisation of time and space in 'schools'. This past organisation is confronted with the current organisation of time and space in 'learning environments'. By contrasting both maps the paper focuses on the main characteristics of the current experience of time and space, that is, 'environmental self-understanding', and explores in the final section the dark side of this self-understanding.

1 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary discourse the family and school no longer appear as *institutions* for child rearing and education. The leading (reform) discourse in academic contexts as well as in the popular media prefers the concept of the 'learning *environment*'. The use of this concept is endemic. Schools and classrooms, as well as the work place and the Internet, are considered today as learning environments. Furthermore, people today are regarded as learners and one main target of school education has become 'learning'

pupils and students how to learn. The roles of teachers and lecturers are consequently redefined as instructors, designers of (powerful) learning environments, and facilitators or coaches of learning processes.

It is not an exaggeration to consider this new vocabulary as already being part of our collective experience or current self-understanding as teachers, lecturers or researchers, or at least, as guiding the reform of educational practices. The paper however will not focus on the consequences of these reforms for teachers and the effects on the practice of teaching. Instead, the paper takes these (reform) discourses, and the current way of speaking about and looking at 'learning', as a point of departure to analyse the new mode of understanding ourselves and the world that is implied. The aim of this paper is to argue that the current self-understanding in terms of learning environments is not merely about a renewal of our vocabulary, but an indication of a far more general transformation of the world of education. In short, we want to argue that the current self-understanding in terms of 'learning environments' and 'learners' indicates a shift in our experience of time and place; a shift from what is called further on in this paper a 'historical self-understanding' to a 'environmental self-understanding'. In order to clarify the precise scope of this paper, two preliminary remarks have to be made: on the 'curiosity' underlying this research and on the understanding of the terms 'space and time'.

In order to fully explore and describe current transformations, we want to apply a kind of 'curiosity' that, according to Foucault, includes an attitude of *care* for the present (Foucault, (1980, p. 108; cf. Rajchman, 1991, p. 141). The aim of this attitude of care is not to 'understand' the present, but to 'cut' into the present or to 'introduce a discontinuity' in our current self-understanding (Foucault, 1984a, p. 88). This Foucauldian curiosity is motivated by a willingness to become a stranger in the familiar present (of 'learning environments') and to regard who we are and what we do ('facilitating learning processes') as no longer obvious. As such, curiosity combines both vigilance or attention and distance (towards oneself in the present) (Gros, 2001, p. 512). Hence, the first aim of this essay is to try to cut into our current understanding of the world of education in terms of 'learning environments'. It can be read as a careful attempt to modify our mode of being in the present, an attempt to 'live the present otherwise' (Foucault, 1979, p. 790), to open up spaces in the present in order to think otherwise about pedagogy—beyond the current ideas on instruction in learning environments.

Second, in this essay special attention will be given to the issues of space and time in educational settings. The concern for space and time should be located at two levels. First, and in line with the 'spatial turn' in social science, it is important to acknowledge the 'spatial context in which particular identities develop and are sustained' (Paechter, 2004, p. 307; cf. Giddens, 1990). Therefore, we want to focus on how past and present modes of self-understanding (of pupils, teachers, parents) are connected with a particular spatial (as well as temporal) *organisation* of educational infrastructures and places (cf. Nespor, 1994; Edwards and Usher, 2000,

2003; Paechter *et al.*, 2001; Mulcahy, 2006). Second, and on a different level, we want to focus on the past and present *experience* of space and time (of pupils, teachers, parents) as such, that is, how time and space are being objectified within different modes of self-understanding (cf. Foucault, 1967/1984; Castells, 1996). The term ‘experience’ (like related terms such as ‘self-understanding’ and ‘consciousness’) is used here in a specific, Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1984b, p. 13). It refers to a mode of seeing and a way of speaking (about ourselves, others and the world) that emerges in a particular moment and context, and that gradually becomes the (evident) horizon of what we do and think. (Foucault described the emergence of ‘sexuality’ and ‘madness’ as such an experience.)

At this level, we want to develop the thesis about a shift from *historical* self-understanding towards *environmental* self-understanding, that is, regarding oneself as pupils, teachers and parents as part of an ‘environment’. The shift from ‘the historical’ to ‘the environmental’ is our attempt to explore and describe what is called in more familiar terms the transition from modernity to post-modernity (Lyotard, 1979). Historical self-understanding refers to an experience that privileges time (objectified as ‘historical development/progress/accumulation’) over space (regarding space in terms of ‘location and extension’). Environmental self-understanding refers to an experience that privileges space (objectified as ‘environment’) over time (regarding time as the ‘here and now’ in an environment).

In sum, the first part of this essay will draw upon Foucauldian concepts in order to map the modern organisation of time and space in schools (section 2). In the next section, this past organisation will be confronted with the current organisation of time and space in learning environments (section 3). Contrasting both maps will help to focus further on the main characteristics of the current experience of time and space (discussed in sections 4 and 5), in order to explore, finally, the ‘dark side’ of this environmental understanding of education (section 6).

2 THE MODERN ORGANISATION OF TIME AND SPACE IN SCHOOLS

Although often discussed elsewhere, we want to start with a schematic Foucauldian (1977) characterisation of the modern organisation of schools (see for example: Pongratz, 1989; Ball, 1990; Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998). Without claiming to produce an exhaustive description, we will focus in particular on the organisation of time and space and the self-understanding (of pupils, teachers and parents) that emerges here (see also Masschelein and Simons, 2007).

The modern school is an organisation that positions and classifies people spatially in view of controlling their behaviour and purposefully organising individual development. This classification is regarded as indispensable for a detailed surveillance and examination of pupils’ development over a period of time. Or to put it more precisely: this spatial organisation is the condition needed to regard pupils’ individuality in

evolutionary terms and to view the pupil as an object or ‘case’ for adequate classroom instruction and judgement. Foucault stressed that this arrangement and comparison in classrooms does not deprive pupils of a kind of ‘natural’ individuality or identity. On the contrary, without this spatial and temporal organisation in schools the modern experience of pupils’ individuality or identity (in evolutionary terms) would not be possible at all. It is important indeed to underline in more detail the specificity of this evolutionary individuality.

Foucault elaborated in detail how disciplinary practices from the 18th century onwards produced a specific experience of space and time, which was also related to the establishment of scientific disciplines and practices in the human sciences. He clarified how the spatial and temporal organisation of schools divided duration into successive or parallel segments, where they add up in a cumulative series of temporal stages, towards a terminable stable point. This organisation allowed for the discovery of time as an ‘evolutive’, linear process that is characterised as ‘progress’. In Foucault’s words: ‘The disciplinary methods reveal a linear time whose moments are integrated, one upon another, and which is orientated towards a terminal, stable point, in short, an “evolutive” time ... at the same moment, the administrative and economic techniques of control reveal a social time of a serial, orientated, cumulative time: the discovery of an evolution in terms of “progress”. The disciplinary techniques reveal individual series: the discovery of an evolution in terms of “genesis”’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 160). Time is thus administered by making it useful, by segmentation, seriation, synthesis and totalisation.

These disciplining practices lead to a specific problematisation (and consciousness), and allow for specific scientific disciplines to emerge, like an ‘analytic pedagogy’. This is a type of pedagogy that establishes educative procedures dividing the process of learning into several levels, and hierarchising each step of development into small cumulative steps. In this context, questions related to ‘goals’ or ‘ends’ (that is, the terminal state) and ‘means’ appear as elements of the general concern to organise ‘development’. By bending behaviours towards a terminal state (a fixed norm), disciplinary exercises make possible ‘a perpetual characterization of the individual, either in relation to this term [state], in relation to other individuals or in relation to a type of itinerary’ (p. 161). This short account helps to clarify how the modern school and classroom arrangement normalises pupils.

Normalisation involves specific activities such as: homogenisation on the basis of age (groups), differentiation with regard to the subject material of teaching, definition of aptitude and abilities of each pupil, regular measurement/assessment of the development of individuals on the basis of examinations (and grades or ranks), noting gaps and hierarchising qualities, skills and aptitudes in order to reward or punish pupils (Foucault, 1977). The allocation of a normalised position in this arrangement of time or space makes it possible for the pupil to know herself in relation to other pupils based on norms. It leads to ‘scholastic’ knowledge about the self as pupil or ‘normalised’ self-knowledge. In

short, the pupils' relation of the self to the self is a relation mediated by ranks, marks, or averages (in relation to schoolmates of roughly the same age).

In this arrangement, the writing of a report based on marks and ranks is a kind of instrument for positioning a pupil (and oneself as pupil), and this reported knowledge supports educational intervention or correction and further disciplinary surveillance. In short, this 'scholastic' knowledge and self-knowledge is the directory for a successful, gradual and programmed school career. In the modern school and classroom, the pupil is therefore someone who can and should orient herself (or who is being oriented) by marks and averages. Based on these marks and ranks, and in the name of aptitudes and abilities, it is an orientation with a particular destiny and towards a clearly defined future within the school system and finally within society. We will later clarify the way in which the orientation within learning environments is different. However, it is important first to discuss the modern relationship between school life and family life.

Indeed, the organisation of time and space in schools and classrooms, as well as the circulation of 'scholastic' knowledge and self-knowledge, penetrate the family and redefine it as a milieu of education or an extension of school-life (Donzelot, 1977). Parents, for instance, come to know their children in comparison to classmates and in relation to what is average or normal. Through these orientations towards the normal at school parents become involved in the school career of their children, i.e. as parents they can re-orient their pedagogic behaviour and their way of behaving in the family receives a 'scholastic' dimension and relevance. Hence, school reports on pupils correlate with new parental responsibilities and, as a result, with parental feelings of pride ('look at my child...') and experiences of (im)perfection ('it is my fault that my child...'). In modern society, parents' views of their children become coloured by 'scholastic' lenses, from the time children get up in the morning until they go to bed at night, at work and at play, and children become as closely observed and monitored by parents as they are within the rhythm of the school life.

3 THE CURRENT ORGANISATION OF TIME AND SPACE IN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The current organisation of time and space in many schools (and elsewhere) is different (see also Nespor, 1994; Edwards, 2002). As mentioned earlier, the aim of this essay however is not to focus in detail on subtle historical developments, but to highlight discontinuities through confronting the modern organisation (and experience) of time and space described earlier with its current organisation in learning environments. For the description of current learning environments, we will rely mainly on discourses and practices of influential reform initiatives in Flanders (Belgium) (Bossaerts *et al.*, 2002; Ministry of the Flemish Community (MFC), 2006), the Netherlands (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and

Science (DMECS), 2004) and the UK (Pollard and James, 2004), supported by discourses and reform initiatives of international organisations such as OECD and UNESCO.

In all these discourses, a shift can be detected from talking about normalised school careers to looking at individual learning trajectories and 'personalised learning' (Bossaerts *et al.*, 2002; Pollard and James, 2004). Additionally, these discourses claim that pupils should be regarded today as the subjects of learning and no longer as merely objects of teaching (methods): '... the learning of pupils, not teaching, must be the main priority.' (DMECS, 2004, p. 13) Learning is the central term here, and is defined as a 'process of change and development'—at the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes, or competencies. 'Learning to learn' is about becoming a (mature, independent) 'learner', that is, someone who has learned to manage or steer this ongoing process of change or accumulation of competencies by oneself (MFC, 2006). From this perspective, pupils' individuality and identity is no longer conceived in evolutionary terms (with a clear destination). As learners involved in an ongoing process of learning or accumulation, pupils' individuality and identity is seen as always provisional. It is a momentary phase in a trajectory or lifelong process. As such, individuality and identity are considered as snapshots of realised opportunities at a certain moment (e.g. acquired competencies), on the one hand, and of the remaining learning needs (to continue the learning process), on the other.

Accordingly, what is suggested in these reform initiatives is that the learning environment in schools (and in other organisations) should be designed with a view to stimulating processes of learning (to learn) and in particular offering learning resources and learning opportunities. The teacher is regarded as a main actor in this design: 'It is essential for a teacher to be able to create learning environments ... that lead to a maximum of profit of the learning process. The management activities of the teacher are focused on creating the condition for learning' (MFC, 1999, p. 11). In order to be effectively offering 'stimuli' for learning, learning environments should function furthermore as an environment of simulation. The challenge according to current school reformers is to simulate real-life stimuli (e.g. problems) in order to enable effective learning (e.g. problem-solving) (MFC, 2006). Resources and stimuli from the societal environment, the labour environment, the cultural and political environment can be simulated within learning environments and used as learning resources (to train one's ability to learn). As such, these discourses on reform argue that adult life and challenges in the adult environment should be virtually present in the school environment. Society is a resource for the determination of realistic learning goals or real-life problems (useful competencies); it is a yardstick for assessing the functionality of what has been learned (practical relevancy), or a resource for converting knowledge into competencies (internship).

It is important to notice that, according to this discourse, neither age nor subject material, nor time of 'scholastic' evolution, determine someone's position as learner: 'Choosing for the pupil is choosing to deal with

differences. Each pupil is different, each learns differently. It is the task of the school to provide each pupil with an education that addresses his particular talents, learning style, baggage and background' (DMECS, 2004, p. 16; Bossaerts *et al.*, 2002). In a strict sense, within a learning environment the idea of a (normal) 'position' no longer makes sense. Instead, a learner is in continuous movement or involved in an ongoing process to accumulate competencies in order to satisfy learning needs. These learning needs correlate with the chosen learning trajectory, the phase in the learning trajectory, prior learning outcomes and personal preferences, disabilities, etc. Hence, in contemporary discourse pupils are regarded as all having unique needs and foremost (stimulated and simulated) learning needs, and the reforms stress again and again that 'the average pupil does not exist' (*Klasse voor Ouders*, 1997, p. 2). Individual needs appear as normative and these needs are variable and relative. Consequently, what is required today is a 'tailored curriculum', 'pupil choice for study and learning' and 'flexibility leading to qualifications for all' (Pollard and James, 2004, p. 4; Bossaerts *et al.*, 2002).

In the learning environments suggested by the reformers, continuous assessment and feedback become indispensable. These technologies offer a snapshot image of someone who is in movement and they accompany someone who is involved in an ongoing process. As such, in her unique trajectory the learner is no longer in need of surveillance and normalising instruction, but is in need of permanent monitoring, coaching and feedback. What is needed in 'personalised learning' is 'setting personal targets', giving 'effective feedback to the learner' and 'effective use of data to plan learning' (Pollard and James, 2004, p. 4). For the pupil who is steering her own learning process, self-knowledge is about information: information on the required competencies that will give access to a learning environment, on the expected learning outcomes, on the required time investment; information manuals or instructions on how to (learn to) manage the learning process; information on the added value of competencies obtained elsewhere and information on the supply of learning environments. Also necessary for this pupil is information on model or successful trajectories, on the average time investment required and on the market value of (combinations of) modules. All this information helps the learner to be an effective 'autonomous chooser' (see also Marshall, 1996).

As a result, the arrangement of the school as an environment of 'continual learning lines' correlates with the need for what the DMECS calls 'permanent information for permanent orientation' (DMECS, 2004, p. 14). What is required in an environment where one has to know everyone's movements and needs at any moment is a concentration of this kind of information in a system of permanent monitoring or positioning (Vrije Centra voor Leerlingenbegeleiding/Centres for Pupil Monitoring, 2002). This 'environmental' monitoring has a particular aim. Permanent monitoring helps to connect different learning environments and protect the continuity of the learning trajectory, from the point of view of the learner: 'It is the shared responsibility of primary and secondary schools to

exchange the knowledge and data on the pupil in such a way that the pupil can continue the path he has chosen as much as possible. Continual pupil-monitoring systems and digital portfolios could be important instruments for accomplishing this' (DMECS, 2004, p. 14). The aim is no longer to know oneself as a pupil in relation to a particular standard, in view of a societal destiny and based on a normalising judgement. Instead, self-knowledge is about the endless accumulation of learning outcomes in one's personalised learning trajectory, and about the in-between 'trade balance' of learning investments.

The reference level for this kind of learning balance is no longer an average as in the modern school organisation. A child's reference level in today's learning environments is the previous phase in her own individual learning process. Therefore, each pupil is for herself the biggest competitor and, being the norm for oneself, everything can always be better or different. The good learner in this context is someone who knows her strengths and weaknesses, and is aware of remaining learning needs. Averages and marks can still be useful in today's learning environments, but they have a particular function. Information on averages functions as a 'benchmark', and can inspire and motivate pupils in their self-competition: 'where do I stand in comparison to others?' This is where the competitive notion of 'excellence' enters the scene of current school reform (see also Readings, 1996). From the viewpoint of 'excellence', comparisons and averages primarily hold the risk of being regarded as a comforting norm and, as a result, for interrupting the ongoing process of accumulation and competitions with oneself. Excellent learners compete foremost with themselves. Before focusing more abstractly on the changed experience of time and space in learning environments, it is important to focus briefly on the redefinition of family life (among other spheres of life) within contemporary educational discourse.

In this context, the family too is conceived as a learning environment; families are more or less powerful or effective, with small or large learning opportunities/resources and more or less adequately simulating (for children) the broader societal environment or the learning environment within schools. Due to this organisation of time and space in terms of learning environments, parents and teachers become partners or 'stakeholders'—among other partners in the broader environment of the school. As stakeholders they have to 'exchange knowledge' in view of optimally coaching the personal learning process of the child (Pollard and James, 2004, p. 14; see also OECD, 1997). All stakeholders must take into account the diversity of learning opportunities and must recognise the added value of each environment: '... the pupil can achieve more and at a higher level and can use his talents better if we are successful at integrating learning inside and outside of schools, as well as formal and informal learning, into the regular course programme better and recognise different learning experiences via, for instance, portfolio' (DMECS, 2004, p. 19). Hence, the reform discourses stress constantly that the labour division between both partners is not stable. It is the topic of ongoing bargaining—who is responsible for what? who coaches what?—and decisions on labour

division depend upon the needs and interests within the societal environment. As such, bargaining about the division of labour—in view of optimally ‘co-ordinated services in/out of schools to support the whole child’ (Pollard and James, 2004, p. 4)—is a permanent concern and is part of the design of today’s learning environments.

4 THE EMERGENCE OF AN ‘ENVIRONMENTAL’ SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Based on the previous map of the present organisation of time and space, and in contrast with some features of the modern (school) organisation, we want to clarify that the concept of ‘(learning) environment’ (combined with the many reform initiatives and monitoring tools for learners used today) indicates the emergence of a new experience of time and space, a new self-understanding. Regarding the world as (learning) environment, and regarding oneself as learner in this world, has the following implications.

Primarily, what is being stressed when referring to an environment is the ‘here and now’: an environment creates challenges and needs here and now, and offers opportunities or resources here and now (Donzelot, 1991, p. 276). This kind of environmental self-understanding is a-temporal and leading to an experience of a ‘timeless time’, an ‘ever-present’ or ‘eternal ephemerality’ (Castells, 1996, pp. 433, 467). To regard oneself as inhabiting an environment implies that one’s self-understanding is focused on present capacities and opportunities to meet present challenges and needs. Of paramount importance are the capacities and resources that one has at one’s disposal and therefore it is indispensable to have transparent and up-to-date information on what is available here and now. This environmental self-understanding implies a particular conception of the past and the future.

From this viewpoint, someone’s past is no longer regarded as a hidden history, as what is partially revealed; and it is not conceived of as determining one’s present, and (if not ‘therapeutically re-worked’) also one’s future actions. The new self-understanding’s relation to the past is captured very well in recent sociological accounts of the ‘individualized society’. Beck, for example, notices that perceptions have become ‘private’ and ‘ahistorical’: ‘the temporal horizons of perception narrow more and more, until finally in the limiting case *history* shrinks to the (*eternal*) present, and everything revolves around the axis of one’s personal ego and personal life’ (Beck, 1992, p. 135). The past thus is judged in terms of the opportunities (and resources) it offers today to face present challenges. Therefore the past is something that can and should be used or forgotten in view of these challenges and the future they open up. What is at stake in an environment is the preparedness to clean one’s past and memory in view of present usefulness, potential and benefit and thus to safeguard one’s opportunities ‘here and now’. As a result, the human subject is no longer regarded as that

which is foundational or underlying—always already there, more or less transparent—but as a snapshot of realised opportunities.

For this environmental self-understanding, not just the past but also the future is conceived in terms of the opportunities and limits of the ‘here and now’. The future is what could be realised or constructed in view of the opportunities and resources that one has at one’s disposal. Hence, the world is no longer something ‘outside’, as Arendt stated, and something that has its own durability (Arendt, 1994). Neither is the world, as modern (techno-) scientists assumed, that which can and should be deciphered in order to change or master it through the application of knowledge and understanding. In environmental terms, the world is what offers here and now opportunities and resources to construct a future. The future of the world therefore is a calculation on the basis of what is available here and now, in a particular environment.

It is this *environmental* self-understanding that we would like to outline in more detail by focusing in particular on the experience of human finitude that emerges here: how do we (as learners) experience our finitude while moving around in environments? Drawing upon Deleuze (1986), the specificity of the present experience of finitude in (learning) environments can be depicted when juxtaposing it schematically with pre-modern and modern experiences of finitude.

In pre-modern times, people experience their finitude in confrontation with an infinite (God) outside of the world. In relation to God, people acknowledge infinitude and learn to know themselves as finite beings. Yet people also come to understand themselves as able to appropriate this finitude and to find their destiny in this appropriation (for example, in living according to a divine order and its moral law). According to Deleuze, this relation between God and human finitude transmutes in modernity to become a secular relation between infinite processes within the world and within humanity. Hence, modern humanity experiences a finitude again but in a quite different way. In modern times, language, labour processes and processes of life (but also culture, nationality, rationality and reason) are regarded as autonomous processes having their own history and development (Foucault, 1966). Division of labour and capitalism, for example, as well as the evolution of life and natural selection, are regarded as occurring independently from singular persons. In relation to the infinitude of these (inner-world) processes, mankind experiences finitude in a new way, but also attempts to appropriate this finitude and to give life a particular, human destiny. Examples of these appropriations are the (teleological) stories on emancipation and progress both at the individual and collective level. These are the stories on the glorious future of (German, French, English) cultures and nations and on the cultivation and emancipation of each and all (see also Lyotard, 1979). These stories, with their distinctive political and educational dimension, hold the promise of a human destiny, i.e. a future reconciliation of mankind with its true nature. Hence, these modern stories assume a kind of *historical* self-understanding, i.e. an understanding of the self as being part of a historical process, as having a historical mission and heading towards a glorious future.

What we want to argue, and drawing on Deleuze, is that exactly the modern experience of finitude and the appropriation in projects of emancipation is no longer ours—despite all nostalgia. There is a shift from this *historical* self-understanding to our present *environmental* self-understanding. In addition, what emerges is a new experience of finitude, and a new way to appropriate this finitude.

5 THE EXPERIENCE OF FINITUDE WITHIN (LEARNING) ENVIRONMENTS

To regard oneself as being part of an environment leads to a particular experience of finitude: *the experience of being permanently in a condition with limited resources* (Deleuze, 1986). Finitude here has a spatial dimension (the environment) and this spatiality generates a particular temporal dimension (the ‘here and now’, ‘the future that is virtually present’, ‘the benefits from the past that are available’). This is different from the modern experience of finitude, for modern consciousness first of all had a temporal dimension (a historical consciousness and a historical project of emancipation) and in addition a spatial dimension (for example a ‘scholastic’, disciplinary arrangement of a teleological emancipation) (Foucault, 1966). But not just the temporal and spatial dimension of the experience of finitude has changed. Also the appropriation of this finitude has a different meaning.

Appropriation is no longer something that people have lost and that they have to gain back, as in Marxism, humanism, liberalism, etc. That is a typical modern story of appropriation of one’s past and future. Appropriation of finitude nowadays is instead a permanent dedication. Being confronted permanently with limited resources, what people have to appropriate is the force to combine in an unlimited way the limited resources that one has here and now at one’s disposal. It is the capacity to make original combinations and to create or construct what is needed, here and now, within an environment. Appropriation thus is about ‘sampling’ and ‘recycling’ linguistic, social, cultural, natural resources and being ‘innovative’.

It is important to stress again that for this environmental self-understanding the modern idea of progress and emancipation, and its historical assumption, no longer makes sense. Instead, the word ‘empowerment’ becomes part of our vocabulary of daily struggle (Cruikshank, 1996; Donzelot *et al.*, 2003). It is about empowering people instead of emancipating classes, races and cultures. Of course, it is still possible indeed to qualify a single, creative act, here and now, in terms of emancipation and progress. Yet this essentially temporal qualification then merely refers to the success of an (empowerment) initiative within a particular environment and at a particular moment. What is really at stake is seeking to be empowered or to have the power and authority to face challenges in one’s environment. Thus, if one wants to stick to the term ‘emancipation’, one should keep in mind that environmental emancipation

first of all has a spatial dimension; the qualification in terms of emancipation expires when there is a new, more successful combination and when there are new environmental needs.

The shift from emancipation to empowerment does not imply that there are no longer reliable stories to orient ourselves in the world or that people (states, cultures, communities, etc.) are lost without destiny. There are still stories—even ‘meta-narratives’—yet these are focused on empowerment or environmental emancipation. An example is the story of the empowerment of Europe as told in the Lisbon Declaration: to become the strongest and most dynamic knowledge society and economy in the world (Lisbon European Council, 2000). It is a story about Europe’s lack of competitiveness in comparison to that of the United States and Asia. The story pictures a snapshot of realised opportunities and mobilised resources and summons European countries to combine in a creative and successful way the (reserve of) resources and opportunities in our European environment. It is a story about a Europe that wants to compete with itself and that benchmarks and monitors its performance. Part of the story is to recall Europe’s history—i.e. the historical importance of Europe as knowledge society *avant la lettre*—in order to remind us of the potential that is available. In short, it is a story about a future—some prefer to use the word ‘survival’—of a Europe that is virtually present.

This shift from a historical to an environmental self-understanding helps to explain the overwhelming use of the word ‘learning’ today (Simons and Masschelein, 2008). Learning is regarded as the fundamental force or capacity for appropriation. Through learning, mankind is regarded as able to face challenges within an environment. As a consequence, learning needs are translations of limits and opportunities in an environment, and their detection is a first step in the ongoing, strategic appropriation of one’s finitude. The societal norm today is the ability to use autonomously one’s learning force, determine carefully one’s learning goals and manage efficiently and effectively the learning process. The norm is having a permanent dedication to find or ‘construct’ one’s destiny, to make ‘projects’ and to learn. Therefore, optimal learning today presupposes, as a kind of environmental virtue, ‘strategic reasoning’ or the ability to read the environment, to judge potentialities in terms of usefulness, to foresee needs, to dare to take risks in order to become excellent, etc.

Environmental self-understanding, and the strategy of appropriation through learning, also explains the emergence of new tensions (and political attitudes). The tension between being conservative and being progressive belongs to a modern, historical self-understanding, for both poles presuppose a temporal, historical dimension. Within an environmental self-understanding, a tension between being pro-active and being re-active begins to emerge. Both poles can be regarded as possible attitudes or strategies towards challenges and opportunities in an environment. Similarly with regard to the concept of emancipation in the ongoing struggle of empowerment, the concept ‘tradition’ may still be part of present (political) vocabularies. However, ‘tradition’ today refers to a kind of resource or an ‘added value’ to face current challenges. It

refers to a remainder from the past that becomes (again) a useful resource and should be conserved for that reason.

Finally, it is within this space of thought that societal as well as individual problems can be unmasked as learning problems, or as difficulties with regard to empowerment and the appropriation of one's finitude. Unemployment, for example, can be explained as an unsuccessful combination of human resources within the present environment, and (re)training can be regarded as a solution. Stress can be explained by a lack of pro-activity, and limited social skills can be regarded as the cause of solitude (cf. Rose, 1990). These problems are all to be considered as being caused by an unsuccessful appropriation of one's finitude and, as a result, learning is suggested to be a solution. In sum, learning and 'mobilising the lifelong learner' are regarded as conditions for well-being and welfare, and ultimately for life as such (Edwards, 2002).

Drawing upon this outline of the present arrangement of time and space, and the emergence of an environmental self-understanding, the following section explores the dark side of this self-understanding: the explosion of systems of monitoring and assessment (in order to position oneself permanently).

6 THE DARK SIDE OF 'ENVIRONMENTAL' SELF-UNDERSTANDING: BEING A-BAN-DONED

To experience oneself as being part of an environment implies that the appropriation of one's finitude (through learning) and finding a destination (in empowerment) are permanent dedications. The emergence of environmental self-understanding, however, cannot be disconnected from an explosion of monitoring and assessments systems.

As discussed earlier, the project of steering one's learning process means that the learner is permanently in need of a particular kind of information, that is, information about her performance. She needs to know how to improve or change her performance in order to meet more optimally her needs within an environment. This kind of evaluative information is described in cybernetics as 'feedback', and its function is to control the operation of a system 'by inserting into it the results of past performance' (Wiener in van Peursen *et al.*, 1968, p. 57; cf. McKenzie, 2001, p. 70). Feedback information, and detailed self-assessment based on the feedback that is available ('what are my strengths? what are my weaknesses? what are my learning needs?'), allows the learner to 'govern' herself within an environment. Feedback is the kind of information that is indispensable to orient one's learning force and therefore to orient one's empowerment through learning. In other words, while moving around in environments feedback functions as a kind of permanent 'global positioning', for one who is seeking to be permanently 'empowered'. Hence, feedback and self-assessment becomes a powerful steering mechanism in today's learning environment (cf. Bröckling, 2006).

At this point, it is important to stress the difference from the position within a modern (disciplinary) organisation (such as the school and classroom). The modern school and classroom, as we explained in the second section of the paper, works according to fixed norms and standards and with experts observing and judging pupils on a regular basis and according to these norms and standards. The learner in contemporary discourses, however, is no longer in need of regular surveillance and normalising instruction by experts, but is in need of permanent feedback in order to permanently know one's own position (Deleuze, 1990). What emerges is the permanent need for feedback: How was my performance? Where am I standing? Please, evaluate me (See also McKenzie, 2001). In other words, feedback and self-assessment function as a kind of permanent 'global positioning'—permanent feedback information for permanent orientation. Regarding oneself as part of an environment correlates with the experiences of wanting to know one's position at each moment. The ideal situation is the situation where one disposes of what is called 'concurrent feedback', that is, feedback that one receives during (and not after) one's performance.

This ideal of self-government and self-control based on permanent environmental positioning (and feedback information) does not imply, however, there is no (longer) external control. The type of control has changed, and the learner is confronted with new figures entering the scene of surveillance and judgment. For instance, personae enter the scene and tribunals are installed in order to measure, judge and develop the degree of 'capitalizing oneself through learning' (e.g. counsellors), to guard the access to environments (e.g. to new learning environments and their trajectories, to labour environments . . .) and to judge one's potential (e.g. professional assessors). It seems as if each environment has its own assessment mechanisms, organises its own commissions of assessment, judgement and selection, and defines its own criteria to judge whether access can be provided. This becomes clearly visible in the school environment. Qualifications obtained at school, for instance, are no longer a sufficient condition to enter the labour market. They are at best a necessary condition. Pupils instead are asked to regard themselves as learners and to focus on lifetime employability. Each labour organisation decides itself whether additional learning trajectories are needed in order to grant learners access and to employ them (provisionally). It is important to stress here that the criteria by which to judge someone (that is, to assess someone and to give someone access to an environment) are not fixed and decided in advance. What today is sufficient or a requirement to have access to an environment may no longer be sufficient or required tomorrow.

What we want to highlight here is that the act of determining and fixing criteria, rules and norms no longer precede the acts of judgement. In today's environments, both acts are confused or coincide. Increasingly, decisions are made *ad hoc* and one learns to know the criteria during the verdict. Information on the criteria used to decide on admission of access is often communicated together with the information on the decision itself:

'Your application is rejected for you do not meet these particular requirements.' But this information on criteria is always too late in order to be useful. In this context, the act of decreeing and judging is often the mandate of the same character, the same commission, or the same board. In a sense, judiciary power and legislative power are being mixed up. Consequently, and drawing upon the ideas of Agamben (1997), within an environmental arrangement of time and space one is increasingly handed over to or at the mercy of sovereign power. This type of power does not make judgements based on criteria or rules that were formulated earlier on, but establishes these criteria and rules in the very act of judgement.

From here we can conclude that perhaps the concept 'being abandoned' characterises most adequately the experience of being part of an environmental condition, that is, the experience of being free from any normalising framework yet at the same time running the risk of being given up. The term 'abandoned' should be understood here in its double meaning: being wholly free from restraint, but at the same time being given up or forsaken (Agamben, 1997). Thus, it is not just about being 'abandoned', but at the same time about being 'banned', which implies being expelled from regular or normal life, and thus being free, yet at the same time no longer being protected by rules, norms etc. An environment like a learning environment at school or a labour environment no longer offers a normalising and collective framework in order to position and to orient oneself as a pupil, teacher or labourer (in relation to fellow pupils, teachers or labourers). Within an environment, trajectories are defined and pursued following the rhythm of one's own needs (and therefore experienced as being within one's own self-control), but at the same time one is always in a position where one could be handed over to or be at the mercy of external judgements or decisions.

Perhaps the term 'exception' grasps even better the specificity of the experience of being part of an environment. To feel oneself abandoned comes close to feeling oneself an exception or feeling like someone to whom the rule or norm does not apply (*ibid.*). Yet, experiencing oneself as an exception means that one experiences oneself in relation to a norm or rule that is suspended (and thus, the experience of freedom), yet this experience implies at the same time the possible 'execution' of whatever decision on new rules or norms (and thus, the experience of being handed over to sovereign decisions). In short, this condition is about being in a 'state of exception'. Indeed, on the one hand, within a learning environment all learners are 'exceptional' with their individual needs and learning trajectories (not falling under any norm or rule), but on the other hand, each and all may become the victim, or the chosen one, of sovereign decisions. These sovereign decisions are not based on pre-existing norms or rules, but they make or enact rules and norms in the act of deciding.

Hence, environmental self-understanding seems to include a very specific experience; an experience of being exceptional, as not falling under a particular rule or norm, but at the same time experiencing oneself as being at the mercy of ad hoc criteria and judgements. One is thrown

back on oneself (given the opportunity to control oneself), but at the same time always already in a position of being at the mercy of (or of being delivered to) someone or something. In short, the experience of being normative for oneself and of having to find over and over again a destiny (through learning and empowerment) can always suddenly transform into an experience of being handed over (and being judged as inappropriate).

Being at the mercy of sovereign decisions is the dark or shady side of environmental self-understanding. Perhaps foremost children and pupils are 'suffering' from this experience because they are told over and over again they all have unique needs and each of them is exceptional. Today indeed, each pupil or learner is regarded as exceptional; each pupil has special educational needs, and each pupil may choose her own trajectory in view of what she sees as her own destiny. This sounds indeed like a present-day, educational liberation—'zum kinde aus'. However, it is important to keep in mind that this liberation is in fact an environmental strategy of 'empowerment' with its particular seamy side; the emergence of systems of monitoring, feedback and assessment, as well as the exposure to sovereign decisions. Indeed, each pupil is asked to experience herself as unique and exceptional, but this positioning and self-understanding exposes her permanently to sovereign decisions.

The current organisation of learning environments can hardly be regarded as leading to the 'liberation of the child/pupil'—something that most present day reforms nevertheless have in mind. Of course, the normalising judgement on the bases of fixed norms seems to be something of the past. Yet new mechanisms of both self-control and control have entered the (lifelong) learning scene, combined with ad hoc judgements. They transformed pedagogic concerns into matters of monitoring and feedback. A pressing question, therefore, is this: is another pedagogic attitude possible, beyond the permanent control attitudes and ad hoc judgements that are part of environmental self-understanding, yet without restoring (normalising) judgements and pedagogic attitudes belonging to historical self-understanding?

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