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Learning as Educational Experience: Implications for Pedagogical Practice

ABSTRACT: The article introduces a phenomenological understanding of learning – learning as an educational experience – and its implications for pedagogical practice and teaching in the (late) modern age. It also leads to the question of how to investigate learners' educational experiences in school settings. Examples of vignettes and anecdotes are shown as suitable research instruments to capture educational experiences *in medias res* and *in mathesis memorata*.

KEYWORDS: education, general education.

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Since the Enlightenment, education has become a target for empowerment in the tradition of emancipatory education. Accordingly, the transcendental educational ideals of autonomy and maturity (Kant, 1785/2005) are fixed targets, leading educators and pedagogical concepts as well. Education should enable individuals to live, act and behave as autonomous and mature members of a democratic society. Meyer-Drawe (1984/2001) argues that autonomy is a necessary illusion to create democracy; on the other hand, she emphasizes heteronomy as a matter of fact, if the focus is on the corporeal existence of individuals following a phenomenological approach. Democracy depends on the ideal of autonomy, but it doesn't mean educational processes happen autonomously (cf. Eckart, in press). "Autonomy becomes a mirage, if we close off transcendental structures on tangible existence" (Meyer-Drawe, 1998, p. 172 f.). Meyer-Drawe (2012b) calls attention to the fact that learners are trapped in their own lifeworld if self-definition is confused with the assumption that learners initiate their learning processes autonomously. In the context of individualized learning arrangements, the fact of learning as a phenomenon of sociality is neglected. The learner's face gestures and looks (cf. Westphal, 2004), for example, are visible only to others, not to himself. "Because of my corporeal existence I am a perceptive and perceivable being, whereby an idealistically and empirically partition wall between the 'inner' and the 'outer' is breached" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 280). Our perception, corporeal existence and experiences are fundamental for contemplation. As a consequence, thinking doesn't happen before something is experienced. "The individual moves actively and passively through the world, responding to things, which it becomes aware of. The cognition *a priori* (Kant) goes on trial, because physical

functions, senses, makes a contribution to perceive things (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1973).” (Eckart & Mian, 2015, p. 184) Appreciating corporeal expressions makes it possible to respond to the learning experiences while teaching. Supporting learners’ educational experiences requires responsive teaching because, as corporeal beings, we are not completely self-recognizable.

Being visible to others because of a corporeal existence offers a distinctive chance for teaching, but also a possibility for ascriptions. Teachers can support students if they know how they move in their educational processes (Meyer-Drawe, 2013). But is a tactful responsive relation between learners and teachers in school possible, and if so, how? Frontal teaching, open learning groups, individualization as a principle of teaching? This article leads from the theoretical question about *learning as an educational experience* to a methodological part, in which empirical data are introduced as examples of learner’s educational experiences in school. Assuming that learning is an (educational) experience (Meyer-Drawe, 2010), vignettes and anecdotes (cf. Eckart, in press) are appropriate research instruments to investigate students’ educational experiences because these media transport co-experienced or recalled experiences. The readings of these data are guided by the phenomenological imperative “*what reveals itself through how it reveals itself?*” (Waldenfels, 1992, p. 30). In this case, the students’ experiences revealed themselves as experiences in the tension between autonomy and heteronomy (cf. Eckart, in press).

Tanja Westfall-Greiter and Michael Schratz (2010) argue that personalized learning enables learning processes while emphasizing the learners’ experiences. They focus on the problem of individualizing principles of teaching. Individualization as a principle of teaching produces ascriptions between the learning subjects they declare. Following Fleming (2001) and Mecheril (2002), they point out that differences within a community of pupils first of all are produced by ascriptions as an effect of differentiation. Teaching that is aware of this problem needs a new focus on learning processes (cf. Schratz & Westfall-Greiter, 2010). Precisely because “doing difference” means “doing inequality,” pedagogical institutions should be aware of these effects of ascriptions, which in the end means inequality and heteronomy (cf. Eckart & Schratz, 2015).

An innovative perspective on learning processes beyond the reach of teaching (Schratz, 2009; Schratz et al., 2014) focuses on the student’s experiences themselves.

The emphasis on measurable outcomes tends to ignore learning processes which have already culminated and come to closure. Such information comes too late for the teacher to act responsively and proactively. The emphasis on measurable outcomes tends to ignore learning in its nascent state, as the process is set in motion and culminates; what happens in learning processes is rarely the focus of attention, a trend which can even lead to a distorted understanding of what learning is. (Schratz et al., 2014, p. 124)

Understanding learning as experience, Schratz et al. follow a phenomenological approach. As the philosophy of experience, phenomenology is the foundation of the research on lived experience laid out by van Manen (1990) in North America, conducted in the fields of psychology, medicine and education, in which the question of a particular experience is the research focus. The Innsbruck Vignette Research discussed in this contribution is a phenomenological approach to empirical school research, “which attempts to capture the experiences of students in school as they occur in an effort to shed light on learning as it is set in motion and culminates.” (Schratz et al., 2014, p. 125) The idea that individuals are differently different (Mecheril & Ahrens, 2010) means that educative experiences of learning are uniquely like fingerprints, as Heinz von Förster says (Kahl, 1999; Schratz et al. 2014). Educational processes require counterparts and space of experiences.

Learning as experience means to relearn (Meyer-Drawe, 1987, 2008, 2010). In the relearning process, the unknown irritates the learning subject because it is something new, something that doesn't fit current assumptions. Relearning doesn't happen without being hooked (cf. Eckart & Mian, 2015). Becoming moved by the alien could be exciting because it means risking familiar knowledge that is part of the mental constitution and the way of seeing the world. Leaving the known for the unknown leads to a state of unease. If the learner gets into the experience while hesitating, probing for the new, he is almost in a movement, which is a self-movement and a process of transformation, because the horizon changes and the mental constitution as well. This process means seeing the world with fresh eyes (cf. Meyer-Drawe, 2010). But it could also mean the irritation doesn't come to an end. This phenomenological understanding of learning leads us to Koller's (2012) theory of transformation, when he acquiesces that educational processes should be seen in a different way. Referring to Waldenfels, Kokemohr, Buck and Oevermann, he argues that education can't be seen as a harmonious addition of human abilities in Humboldt's way of thinking, but as irritation of the former world- and self-relations, and in this way emphasizing crisis and risks of educational processes (cf. Koller, 2012). In this sense, education takes place if people make experiences that are so alienating to them that familiar possibilities are not enough to cope with new experiences (cf. Koller, 2012).

Following Buck and Waldenfels, Koller refers to concepts of negative experiences or experiences of the alien. Negativity means experiences have potential for disappointment. Disappointment could also mean frustration, but in a philosophical way of thinking it also means the end of an illusion. But of course, as every researcher, for example, knows, it is an exhausting process in which the final result is unclear and sometimes undiscoverable. Koller's concepts refer to Husserl's theory of “Horizontstruktur,” which declares that experiencing something new and alienating is possible only within a horizon that already exists (cf. Koller, 2012). Consequently education takes place as a process of changing horizon, where the old knowledge is connected with the new horizon and becomes part of it (cf. Buck, 1981).

HOW TO INVESTIGATE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES?

The author grasped the following research results in the project *Personal learning and development in diverse communities* (FWF_P 25373-616) and are part of her doctoral thesis (Eckart, in press). The project was driven by the following questions: What happens at school? What is the nature of students' specific experiences at school? What is the educative impact of a specific experience? As a theoretical foundation of the project, learning is perceived as experience in which students respond to the articulated calls of the (school) world (Meyer-Drawe, 2008, 2010; Schratz, Schwarz, & Westfall-Greiter, 2012; Westphal, 2004). It is a process in which the learner isn't ready and finished, but the learner remains open for new experiences and self-experiences (cf. Buck, 1981).

Vignettes: experiences *in medias res*

The Innsbruck Vignette Research uses the Vignette as a qualitative, phenomenologically orientated research instrument like a thick description (Geertz) of an event that was protocolled as it was produced by the researcher using data from the field (cf. Schratz et al., 2014). "As such, vignettes are a means for the researchers to participatively – that is, engaged and undifferently – capture empirically their own experience of the experiences of students at school." (Schratz et al., 2014, p. 126) The research methodology was developed and aimed at capturing the experiences of students in everyday school life to explore phenomena of learning constitutive of personal educational processes and thereby draw learning out of its shadowy existence (cf. Schratz et al., 2014). The essential part of the methodological design is the method of participatory experience (Beekmann, 1987). The learners' co-experienced experiences were captured by vignettes (Schratz et al., 2012). Vignettes are "thick descriptions" (Geertz) revealing the pathic qualities of a tangible moment as perceived by the researcher. "These little stories are sequences of co-experienced scenes of lessons focusing the student's experiences. Therefore researchers visited 24 school across Austria and accompanied two pupils per class, who were chosen by the teacher randomly" (Schratz et al., 2014). Each researcher spent two days in the field on each visit to obtain data, attending to two students recommended by the teachers with the agreement of both the students and their guardians (cf. Schratz et al., 2014).

Vignette: Step out the line

Before the next lesson gets started the pupils wait in their classroom ready to change their seat. Still waiting in the classroom, Julian walks up to the researcher. "The next lesson is so gay!" he whispers to her, referring to the textile lesson that is about to start. "Today we continue November-sewing," Ms. Reichelt says lovely. "For all those, who haven't sewn the grass-blades yet, please finish first!" she assigns. Julian walks up to the sewing machine to sew the grass-blades and sits down. "Oh shit,

it doesn't work. The thread bends." To see what has happened, Alex bends over the machine: "Lift the presser foot and turn the fabric!" he tells him. "Wir nähen kreuz und quer. Füßchen in die Höh' und Köpfchen unters Röckchen," rhymes Julian, imitating Ms. Reichelt. Alex laughs. In this moment Julian discovers the sewing machine next to him – a machine with a special function for sewing a leaf. "I want to try this, I really want to try this pattern!" he whispers enthusiastically. But a different pupil was already working on this machine. As soon as the machine becomes available, he hurries. "Finally, finally the pattern!" he exclaims. Suddenly, Ms. Reichelt appears behind him: "Julian, what are you doing there?" she asks, appalled by him. "I told you that you have to take the normal pattern and by the way, you have to finish!" "Gosh! I wanted to try this pattern. I really wanted to try this!" sighs Julian with sagging head and shoulders.

Reading of the vignette

Julian walks up to the researcher, responding to her. He whispers that she is going to see a "gay" lesson. He knows that it doesn't befit speaking like this about the lesson; otherwise, he wouldn't whisper. He responds to the lesson he already knows, and he identifies it as gay. Textile seems to be something feminine, something he is ashamed of. He doesn't want to be known in the role of a sewer. Is he afraid of being identified as a girl by the researcher or someone else? Gesa Lindemann argues that gender differences are either natural or constructed, but they are interfered with socially (cf. Angerer, 2012). Julian distances himself from the feminine act of sewing, which seem unfamiliar to him. Against the backdrop of the order of gender identity, sewing seems to be anomalous for him. Arriving in the textile room, the teacher tries to get the students in the right mood for sewing. Julian follows her instructions. He walks up to the sewing machine. As the thread bends, he experiences that something doesn't work as expected. He is no longer in control of the machine. So his friend comes and help him and introduces him "to lift the presser foot up high..." Julian follows his friend and starts to rhyme, simultaneously imitating the voice and tonality of his teacher, Mrs. Reichelt: "We are sewing crisscross. Lift the foot up high and put the head below the skirt." While mocking and acting a woman's role, he opens a space for his staging of masculinity. Afterward he becomes interested in another sewing machine with a special function for sewing a leaf he wants to try. Julian is completely excited about the possibility of sewing a pattern with the other machine, which is occupied by another student. Finally, when Julian achieves his beloved new machine, he discovers textile lesson as something new he can identify with. While moving to the other machine without an introduction from his teacher, he steps out of line and disturbs an order. The teacher responds to by asking, "What are you doing?" Julian was suddenly moved by things surrounding him. Maybe the occupation of something new is the attempt to feel normality again. Is another order behind the order of the lesson – an order of gender differences? Nonetheless, with the occupation of the other machine, it could have been possible to make a textile lesson into

a new experience, but it was interrupted by the teacher (cf. Eckart & Mian, 2015). The transcendental ideal of autonomy requires a space of experience where pupils can discover their own potentials; otherwise the progress of maturity becomes disabled.

Anecdotes: students' recalled experiences

The longitudinal study (FWF_P 25373-616) focused on how to investigate recalled school experiences. Guidelines and strategies for leading conversations with students in which they recalled experiences over four years in middle school were developed. The researchers then drafted anecdotes based on the transcripts (Eckart, in press). Anecdotes are understood as brief narratives of an event that we assume really happened in the past (Arrighetti, 2007). From a phenomenological point of view, language can be understood as a responsive and creative expression (cf. Tengelyi, 2007; Waldenfels, 1995). Tengelyi emphasizes the narrative as a way to express experiences (Tengelyi, 2007) because stories have the potential to transport the sense of experiences because of their flexible structure. But experience, because of its multidimensionality, cannot be completely expressed within a story. Usually an anecdote is characterized through a point, an experience, a story line and a focus (cf. Eckart, in press).

Anecdotes condense the pathos of experiences. Was the student telling his experience full of passion, proudly or sadly? "The significance of anecdotal narrative in phenomenological discourse is that it simultaneously pulls us in but then prompts us to reflect" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 121). Reading an anecdote or a vignette could be understood as an aesthetic experience as well (cf. Seel, 1997).

Anecdote: Experiment with consequences

The accident Max had in physics he will surely never forget. It was "an easy experiment: boil some water in a test tube and the cork should come out of it. The test tube maybe had some cracks and the cork was dry. When it became wet it expanded and it couldn't get out of the test tube," Max says. "After 10 minutes it sounds like 'Boom.'" "The test tube Max held with tongs exploded right in front of him. The broken bits of glass were removed immediately. But one of his friends was hurt in the explosion. "An emergency operation was needed, but it worked, blessedly." Max simultaneously communicates this in both a mischievous and an adult way. Unfortunately the lesson was theoretical for the rest of the year. "We were ready to continue experimenting," Max says excitedly, but "the teacher was in shock and didn't feel like it any longer," Max explains in an understanding manner (cf. Eckart, in press).

Reading of the anecdote

The issue of the anecdote “explosion with consequences” is an experiment during a physics lesson. The point is the end of experimenting. The narrator focuses on the accident while the framework of action is given by the experiment’s process.

Max experienced firsthand what it could mean if a thing doesn’t move as it should. The cork deadlocks and the test tube consequently explodes. An experimental arrangement doesn’t work as expected. Knowledge founded in natural science is based on experiments. The sense of them is giving information to find new insights. In Max’s experience this expectation was foiled. Max is so excited about experiments despite the accident. He wants to continue experimenting, but he has to accept his teacher’s decision. His educational process is influenced by this decision at least for this year in the retreat from the dangers of practice to theory. Typical for an experiment is that it could fail. The worst case is that somebody gets hurt, like Max and his friend. What information do we get from a failed experiment? Is there potential for an educational experience? The Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986) demonstrated that progress is related to immense risks and dangers for human existence. If Max realized this fact because of the failed experiment, we don’t know. He is still excited about experiments. Understanding his teacher’s decision shows he knows that experiments in school are related to risk and that it could happen again. The teachers are responsible for the students’ physical safety, which counts for everything in that case. School as a room of physical integrity has a Jungian tradition if we think about corporal punishment, used as means of pedagogy in Europe until the 20th century.

Max’s teacher might be under pressure that his parents hold her accountable for this accident. The teacher is moved by this order like Max, even if Max isn’t excited about it, but he submits. The accident was a shock, but what if Max’s friend had died? Would he still have been enthusiastic? The experience was shocking for the teacher and so traumatizing that he replaced practice for theory. Experiences we already make could disable further educational experiences. Sports and natural sciences pose special risks for individuals. Nevertheless, they offer space for educational experiences like aesthetic perception, which comes to our corporeal existence. Which educational experience could a failed experiment offer? After the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, for example, social movements were formed in the 1980s demonstrating against nuclear energy to call attention to its risk. Meanwhile, alternative ways of producing energy exist. A process of relearning took place there, but not before the Fukushima nuclear disaster occurred. Aside from that, experiments at school and university need to be well prepared, given sufficient time, proofing and control of the equipment.

Anecdote: Individual Learning

Max understands individual learning as being in a little group and the learner doesn’t have to do all the things he already knows, he explains while chuck-

ling about what he said, “because we always learn in that way and by learning individually we develop it further very well.” The class is divided into basic and advanced, “and the advanced get something extra, what the students who do the basics don’t get,” Max says. Usually the advanced students experts tell the others what they have learned, but lately they haven’t done this anymore “because meanwhile they have problems understanding the basics,” Max says gloomily and in a slightly lordly manner. (cf. Eckart, in press).

Reading of the anecdote

Individual learning should enable inclusion in heterogeneous learning groups. Practically, it means students of different levels are divided into smaller groups. Depending on the level, the students receive different tasks, easy or difficult. As a high-performance student, Max is part of the advanced group, in which he gets new things to learn. Are these students in a privileged position compared with the “basic students”? Ascriptions produced by the terms “advanced” and “basic” are obvious. Ability streaming produces ascriptions and have potential for identification. The self-perception of the “basic student” is assumed as just being “basic” which means it could be assumed that the identified basic student doesn’t dare to do more than just basic level, which has an impact on the educational success that follows.

The advanced and basic students don’t exchange their educational experiences anymore, as Max reported. Inclusion doesn’t happen because the others aren’t involved and participate in education as the advanced students do in that particular case. What happens here is just stigmatizing and identification, which means educational justice isn’t realized. Max is stigmatized as an encyclopedia of the class, of which he speaks about in another anecdote. Of course he also becomes excluded by being given that role. His connection to the teachers is better than the majority of pupils. Finding friends was difficult for him after his two friends – other experts within the class – changed schools and left his class. Therefore he became totally focused on school because he wants to become an architect, at all costs.

These expressions of educational experiences as vignettes and anecdotes show that educational experiences are in tension between heteronomy and autonomy. Because of human beings’ corporeal existence, others have a huge impact on educational processes in all directions. Educational processes related to the students’ learning experiences could be understood as a transformation from the old to the new (Koller, 2012). They are embedded in the social constitution of the class and the nature of relationship between teachers and students. Schratz and Westfall-Greiter (2014) argue for a focus on the students’ experiences to enable educational learning experiences and, as a consequence, to focus on personalization instead of differentiation. That means learning processes start with personal activity. Free writing, peer conferences, projects, learning diaries, experiments – all enable personalized learning because it demands and encourages thinking, reflection and interpretation.

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**UCZENIE SIĘ JAKO DOŚWIADCZENIE EDUKACYJNE. IMPLIKACJE DLA
PRAKTYKI PEDAGOGICZNEJ**

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł przedstawia fenomenologiczne ujęcie uczenia się, w którym uczenie się rozumiane jest jako doświadczenie edukacyjne, oraz omawia jego implikacje dla praktyki pedagogicznej i dydaktycznej w czasach (późnej) nowoczesności. Autorka zastanawia się również, jak badać doświadczenia edukacyjne uczniów w środowisku szkolnym. Pokazuje też na konkretnych przykładach, że winietki i krótkie historyjki to użyteczne narzędzia badawcze pozwalające uchwycić doświadczenia edukacyjne *in medias*.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: edukacja, edukacja ogólna.

