‘Complex global problems, simple lifelong learning solutions’. Discuss

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In their introduction to this symposium, Biesta and Osberg argue that complexity theory has pointed to the fundamental unpredictability of the real, and to the ways in which educational practices cannot be controlled. This is in line with Freud’s comment that education is an impossible profession because it cannot mandate or master the future. It also echoes Derrida on undecidability and responsibility. The impossible is that which cannot be foreseen prior to its invention, its actual emergence. To act responsibly therefore is to accept this incalculability to the future, our inability to mandate, and to invent on this basis. To not do so, to subsume one’s actions to a rationale of thinking that we do know what will happen in the future, that it can be engineered, is to act irresponsibly. Complexity theory then is linked to a series of theoretical innovations that suggest a more contingent engagement with the world based on impossibility, undecidability and responsibility. This is inscribed in the concept of strong emergence (Osberg and Biesta 2007).

Complexity theory is part of that range of framings that look at the relations and interactions and networks as crucial to emergence. The more links, the more recursive the system, the more potential there is for indeterminacy. Change will occur but in unpredictable ways. Yet we see in education practices that are very predictable at a systems level. For instance, attainment is marked by systematic effects of gender, class, race. Osberg and Biesta suggest such predictability arises from the work of complexity reduction, whereby recursivity and emergence are reduced. Thus a predictability at the macro level is built into attainment by students increasingly being channelled through standardised forms of assessment, through which the range of possible markers of attainment are reduced.

This notion of complexity reduction can be seen to be similar to the notion of black-boxing in actor-network theory (ANT), wherein actants temporarily lose their relational moorings and seem to have an independent existence. While complexity reduction may work to increase the predictability of practices, black-boxing enables networks to practice as actants.

In Education we are familiar with the desire for predictability and the capacity to mandate the future. Governments look to the education research community to provide them with evidence to inform policy and practice. However, for educators, what is the point of trying to change or improve things if it proves impossible? If predictability is increased by complexity reduction, do we not then cut back on the possibilities of emergence, for invention? Is there a danger that emergence becomes valued and privileged over complexity reduction, when it is through the particular configurations of emergence and reduction that the world is ordered?

In this aporia I want to take lifelong learning as a policy example of the attempt to mandate the future through complexity reduction. However, I also want to argue that

lifelong learning as a concept deconstructs that very possibility by escaping the boundaries of the very reductions to which it is subject.

At the heart of much educational policy making in Europe in recent years are attempts at mastery of the future, of the knowledge economy and social inclusion, with lifelong learning positioned as the means to achieve this. The future is marked by complexity and unpredictability inscribed in the various forms of globalisation at play (Edwards and Usher 2008). The obligatory passage point for education policy becomes the knowledge economy and education in the form of lifelong learning is duly harnessed and reduced to service its production. It is through the uptake of lifelong learning to support the knowledge economy that the future can be mastered and complexity reduced. Here lifelong learning is the service response to global complexity.

Yet this search for mastery has within its margins a lack of mastery. The possibilities for lifelong learning in this sense are impossible. For lifelong learning does not remedy this lack of mastery, but actually accentuates it further. So the lack of mastery creates the conditions for the endlessness of lifelong learning. Thus, rather than being a solution to the problem of change and uncertainty – a condition for mastery – lifelong learning can be therefore understood differently – as actually fuelling the uncertainty to which it is the supposed response. Rather than a route to mastery, lifelong learning might be better considered a condition of constant apprenticeship (Rikowski 1999) or emergence. This occurs because learning as a lifelong and lifewide phenomenon is a set of uncontrolable relations, which can neither be reduced nor black-boxed. It is therefore as much a contributor to global complexity in addition to being a reductive response to it.

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Lifelong learning as a policy goal therefore deconstructs the mastery through which it is so often invoked. It is in educational terms an expression of the impossibility of mastery, of mandating the future, even as it is invoked as the basis for continuing to master. Lifelong learning is symptomatic of the impossibility of education. Its complexity – what some refer to as its conceptual slipperiness – cannot be reduced to the service of the knowledge economy nor social inclusion. There is a constant play of emergence and invention, a play of disordering in the ordering of education.

These ideas signify notions that are a far cry from any certainty about the teleological goals of education and how they are to be achieved. They are based upon processes of constant invention and renewal rather than ultimate purposes as ends. This may or may not be positioned as another reduction. And perhaps this is as it needs to be. In his critique of critical pedagogy's desire for a language of possibility – which itself often attempts certain reductions of possibility - Biesta (1998) extends this idea of the impossibility of mandating the future to all human interactions and suggests, drawing on Derrida and Foucault that practices need to be developed around an 'emancipatory ignorance'. Here

> It just is an ignorance that does not claim to know how the future will be or will have to be. It is an ignorance that does not show the way, but only issues an invitation to set out on the journey. It is an ignorance that does not say what to think of it, but only asks, 'What do you think about it?' In short it is an ignorance that makes room for the possibility of disclosure. (Biesta 1998: 505).

Biesta's argument is related specifically to critical pedagogy, but it is relevant to the reformulation of a discourse of education more generally. This is a pedagogy of invention (Osberg and Biesta 2007).

Formulating an educational discourse around apprenticeship, impossibility and ignorance may seem absurd in these performative times. When outcomes and outputs are to the fore, what spaces are there for educational discourses around emergence? But it is here that I find the concepts of fallibility and conditionality in addition to impossibility helpful. Fallibility because it points to the notion that, even if we practice upon the basis of the best available evidence we have, we know full well it is not perfect, that we cannot mandate. This is turn results in and from a position of conditionality, that is, we *could* do something rather than we *should* do something. Our efforts then are only as good as we currently can establish and they are a process of invention, emergence and reduction, rather than any exercise in mandating and mastery. The normative basis for what we do becomes a more cautiously creative affair, something which I know to be unattractive to many educators who feel the normative potential of education to transform people and societies is unrealised. Fallibility and conditionality provide a basis for invention, for creativity and experimentation in educational practices, based upon impossible possibilities. However, for this to be other than an 'anything goes' approach to education, we now need to address the question of responsibility.

Here, as a stimulus to further this debate, I want to suggest that there is something for the education community to be learned from Weber's classic studies of the ethos of bureaucracy and the more recent work by du Gay (2008, forthcoming) on the ethos of responsibility in bureaucratic work. In educational circles bureaucracy, like management, is often positioned as antithetical to the committed pedagogic work of educators. It can also be seen as a form of complexity reduction in a rather simplistic sense of the term. However, if we look at the work of du Gay, it is precisely enthusiastic commitments that can be problematic. Du Gay is examining particularly the contemporary shift in the ethos of the UK civil service, but one also sees it in the wider literature on leadership and management. Here Weberian bureaucracy is positioned as getting in the way of enterprise. It becomes central to success for the heart to be on the sleeve in what one does at work, as long of course as this is in line with organisational strategy. A committed and enthusiastic workforce is the goal. This produces partisanship and is usually based upon a view of the future to be mandated. This may have come from the political right, but is far from being confined to it.

> In discussions of public sector performance… governments of many different political hues have come to the conclusion that Weberian bureaucracy is not a solution but rather a barrier to 'delivery'. In their search for responsive, entrepreneurial forms of public management, party-political governments rail against the obstruction and inertia of conservative bureaucrats, and seek instead to surround themselves with enthusiastic, committed champions of their policies. (Du Gay 2008, forthcoming)

The ethic of responsibility in Weber takes a different form. For Weber, it is precisely the capacity to work 'without affection or enthusiasm, and without anger or prejudice' that is critical to the work to be undertaken by public officials within modern democracies. In other words, complexity reduction may be a necessary feature of the

ordering of associations for the social to be possible at all. It may therefore be responsible for us to decrease recusivity in certain circumstances, to try and make the impossible possible, at least for the moment. This view seems to me more consistent with the view that mandating the future is impossible but also relies precisely on the forms of conditionality and fallibility I have been outlining. It positions complexity reduction to be important and valuable in making things happen, even if it is also subject to the invention of emergence.

I am not arguing that educators are or should be considered simply as part of the state bureaucracy. What I am suggesting is that the ethos of responsibility that Weber argued to be central to the good working of governing may well have something analogous to tell us in a period in which enthusiasm and commitment is being promulgated as significant attributes to be developed in and through leadership. It might be said that leadership in this sense only adds to the hiatus and sense of crisis we face. But this may involve attempting the impossible, by trying to work against emergence. Whether such is possible in these performative times is another matter.

What I am suggesting here then, is that it is not about invoking either possibility or impossibility, emergence or reduction, invention or performativity, but about trying to formulate ethical orderings within which there is an inherent play of (un)predictability. For me, however unsatisfactory, the concept of lifelong learning symbolises an educational expression of this condition.

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