

“What is pedagogy?”

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I am often asked this question, and often my first impulse is to want to hide from it. I think this is because I am aware of the very complex layers of meaning and the historicity that one will need to engage with and take up, particularly if one considers that this question is being asked within the Canadian context—and, even more specifically, within that of early childhood education. In my hesitation, I also wonder if we as educators are willing to engage with such layering of meaning and historicity. After all, the question is not “How might we begin to think of pedagogy?” What is pedagogy? risks evoking a requisition for a definition, and therefore a foreclosure of pedagogical thought from the start. Herein is the bind of the question “What is pedagogy?” Perhaps sharing its contextual difficulties, its inherent foreclosures, is the best place to start. As, when learning to speak another language, we are invited first to say that we cannot speak it.

I will never forget the conflicted and puzzled responses I received many years ago when I presented to early childhood educators and colleagues the idea that early childhood is a pedagogical context. This idea was not well received. It was seen as a sort of threat to the notion of care. It sounded too directive, too “educational.” However, since then, the concept of pedagogy has proliferated in early childhood contexts. In whispers of possibility, it has started to engage imaginations. It is even present in new policy documents. I find myself noticing that the words pedagogy and pedagogies are repeatedly used now in the context of early childhood education in almost interchangeable ways, as if they are one thing, an obscure, sophisticated supplement of some sort, rather than an indeterminate field of responsive, generative, and collaborative practices of interpretation, ethical critique, and invention. We seem to want to encompass pedagogy within our existing thinking about education and care, rather than to see how we are *already* encompassed by this thinking, determined by it, enclosed and limited within its assumptions so as to be better able to respond and to invent knowledge, subjectivities, and communal forms of life, in and as education.

In this small contribution, I would like to outline some thoughts about what pedagogy is. Of course, these thoughts are never independent from who is thinking them—my history, intellectual commitments, and relation with this concept. In this, I want to start by attempting to rescue the concept from its unfortunate and quite common understanding, particularly in the contexts in which I work, where pedagogy is seen as that which gives us direction in how to manage and instruct children to be able to achieve predetermined educational ends. In my view, pedagogy could not be farther from this idea.

Pedagogy is that which thinks, studies, and orients education: its purposes, its protagonists, its histories, its relations and processes. Pedagogical thought lives within the tension between theory and practice, between what happens and the reflection on what happened. I find that one of the key pedagogical struggles is how not to identify pedagogical thought with only theory or practice. Pedagogy attends to and locates this tension in situated and contextual ways (in the everyday). Pedagogy is not interested in universalisms or objectivist views of knowledge creation.

Considering this, we can say that pedagogy is a body of knowledge (in Europe it is considered a social science). It is *active knowledge*, one that seeks new bases on which to think in diverse and unfolding conditions. This body of knowledge has a long history. Its cradle is Ancient Greece. Its birth was intimately related to philosophy, with whom it keeps a close relation, and over the centuries it has tried to find its identity by letting go of the reliance on disciplines considered more legitimate in education, such as scientific management, and then psychology. *Pedagogy, as a body of knowledge, thinks educational practice; it is reinvigorated by this practice and transforms educational practice.* This is why a pedagogist is someone who not only tries to unsettle practice but also tries to find (and sometimes even liberate) the creative force of practice.

Pedagogy is always interrogating (and responding to) the conditions of our time and its status quo. It does this at the same time it poses the question “What kind of human might we need to consider to respond to the conditions of our times?” Pedagogy asks this question because pedagogy is not only interested in teaching and learning. It is also interested in what conditions are enabled through particular educational processes and curriculum making. What idea of the human do they enable? What subject formations are legitimized and delegitimized? What relational logics do they enact? In other words, in a very basic understanding, pedagogy is interested in the creation of an experience. The question then is “What kinds of experiences are being created in educational contexts? What is their value, their unseen beauty, their vanishing, their withholding and bursting forth?” As history tells us, these experiences can be emancipating or subjugating, deterministic or eventful. They can support logics of dominion or try to keep the question of the collective open.

Therefore, *pedagogy is not only interested in describing the conditions of a particular time context.* As Silvana Calaprice (2016) writes, “*pedagogy must also activate new provocations for the education of our times*” (p. 34). This means not only analyzing the status quo and its relation to education, but also activating possible orientations that will provoke educational processes to invent a living curriculum that experiments with alternative propositions and intentions. I am thinking here about propositions and intentions that would allow for experimentation with different subjective processes and alternative futures. This is why contemporary pedagogy must ask education to find new responsibilities. (This is a topic to be taken up on another occasion.) Considering this, it is not enough to ask “What is pedagogy?” Perhaps we must ask instead “What are early childhood pedagogies for a postcolonial, settler, consumer-driven, and carbon-dependent society?”

If pedagogy has a language, its language is interdisciplinary. This is because pedagogical thought is porous and willing to be contaminated by diffractive conversations with other disciplines. These

conversations help pedagogy to enrich its views and engage the familiar from diverse perspectives. Personally, I could not think education without the arts.

In the Canadian early childhood context, pedagogy is what—among many other invitations—would invite us to consider that it is not enough to continue “window shopping” for the newest educational approach. Much more is at stake, and much more is possible. The invitation instead would be to become ever more attuned to the situated complexities in which one lives, and to therefore become more educationally inventive. This is why pedagogical thought lives at the heart of the relevant invitations that the reconceptualist movement in curriculum theory has invited us to consider over the rocky years of its ensuing neoliberal reaction.

I will leave you with a last consideration. For me, pedagogical thought is always creative and generative, with as many questions as answers. Pedagogy is particularly interested in creating a collective space. It is called to create something that goes beyond centering the work in the development of an individual I. Pedagogy, for me, is interested in the creation of a life—not as a model or an ideal, but as an everyday practice that puts thought into action, that is interested not in prescribing a life but in working at a life, becoming studious of it, being interested in its different forms and formations in what it does and what it invites and in how we become of it. A life that is life-making.

Pedagogy, then, is a decision—to ask its own questions, which are mostly as yet unknown.

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