

Institutional Pedagogies on the Edge between Politics and Therapy

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We would like to reflect on the differences between two streams of French “institutional pedagogy” that have been in direct confrontation in the 60s. In *Vers la pédagogie institutionnelle* Fernand Oury and Aida Vasquez express fierce criticism against the dangers of non-directivity, an approach that René Lourau defends in *L'analyse institutionnelle*. By contrast, René Lourau argues that Vasquez and Oury's approach remains dependent of the illusion of “absolute knowledge” that the teacher could master and that would enable him or her to teach effectively. We hypothesize that these mutual reproaches can only be understood from their respective standpoints: Oury and Vasquez endorse a therapeutic/clinical stand on education; while Lourau focuses on the *political* dimension of education. In turn, we argue that articulating clinical and political approaches to education is an impossible yet inevitable task of our time. In this contribution, we aim at problematizing this aporia in order to create new interrogations about the function of groups in a child's education and how questioning groups implies questioning learning and subject development.

Despite their opposition, these two streams share characteristics. Initially, ‘institutional pedagogies’ aimed at adapting Freinet's techniques to the specificities of urban schools. They both make use of techniques in the classroom as educational *mediations* whose effects on the group and individuals are more beneficial than the traditional directive role of the master. Both strands of “institutional pedagogy” reinforce the role of the class assembly/council and broaden the scope of its tasks. Fernand Oury and Aida Vasquez impose the functioning of the Council on children, but the teacher does not chair the council (various children endorse that position along the school year). The teacher maintains the possibility of vetoing any decision, and expresses his view after the children. The Council is in charge of discussing leisure activities and plans, texts for the journal or objects of exhibition but also conflicts among children, organisational issues in the classroom etc. In Lourau's pedagogy (that we will now call “self-governance pedagogy” for the clarity of the argument) the teacher does not impose the council. It is created by the group of children after the teacher has stepped back and offered/imposed on them to get organised collectively and to decide

on learning activities. The children delimit the teacher's function in the council, the ways speech is shared, how is the chairperson chosen, etc. So the function of the Council is even a bit broader than in institutional pedagogy, as it is the platform where learning assignments and activities are specified, in addition to conflict resolution, extra-curricular activities design, etc. Both practices thus reinforce the importance of the *group* and, we could say use the group a new technique, a new mediation to facilitate education. Yet we see already a double difference between these orientations: the authority of teacher is more present in institutional pedagogy than in self-governance pedagogy, while the curriculum is more discussed (by children) in self-governance pedagogy.

Their respective interpretations of Guattari's definition of transversality help understanding how these two pedagogies diverge from one another. Transversality is complex concept and would require further investigation, but for now, we shall limit ourselves to the definition Guattari provides towards the end of his chapter called « Transversality » (in *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*) :

Transversality is the unconscious source of action in the group, going beyond the objective laws on which it is based, carrying the group's desire. (p. 118)

Institutional practices aim at taking into account transversality so that the group becomes a « group-subject » instead of being subjugated. We will argue that the « unconscious » taken into account by Oury and Vasquez is primarily individual, while for Lourau is the « group » latent dimension. Yet it is important to notice that in both cases, transversality coheres with a structural understanding of education. Problematizing educational settings as *symbolic* settings, both Lourau and Oury & Vasquez consider schools and classrooms places that inaugurate unique articulations between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real for each child. This implies that these pedagogies would consider a child's mutism, aggressive or passive attitude as *acting-out* in reaction to his or her symbolic environment. What matters is not an individual's relationship to an object or the group but the children's « relationships of relationships » to objects, the group or the teacher. What education has to enable, is that John's relationship to writing become as empowering as Julia's relationship to calculating.

Lourau considers that there is always a latent or informal organisation in the classroom that evades the teacher's possible mastery. He is influenced by industrial social psychology. Moreno has conceptualised the informal organisation of workers within an industry as "sociogram" by contrast with the "organigram" (the official structure). When analysing a group of workers, he tries to identify who are the most influential people for a given activity, who are the most depreciated, and then evaluate how that interferes or correspond to the organigram. Lourau translates this view in his educational practice:

A latent, informal or clandestine "organisation" exists behind the most official, the most directive organisation. The specificity of self-governance can only be to unveil this [latent] organisation (in the active meaning of the term). This does not serve to leave learning with the delights and traps of spontaneity, but instead to be able to control the ever-available power of social ties" (*AI*, p. 260)

This hidden organisation is not accessible to the teacher :

The surges of the group, its imaginary (affinities, etc.), he does not control them because his knowledge does not cover the group transversality (its belongings and implicit references). As working group (moment of organisation), the classroom is not raw material that the master's speech and gaze could organise as on the first day of Creation" (p. 260)

Hence self-governance pedagogy is presented as pedagogy of the Real. This real is impossible to master symbolically, thus opens up the work of the collective on itself within and from this constitutive incertitude. This does not imply creating a new organisation ex-nihilo, but it corresponds to getting organised collectively while departing from the idea that in the organisation of the group "everyone has its share and all have it as a whole". Participation is granted in self-governance pedagogy, as the classroom gives right to this hidden ever-emerging organisation. In Lourau's view, enabling the children to take into account this informal organisation and letting them learn how to do it, that is how authentic learning takes place. Children get interested in learning in so far they have their say for real in the organisation of the classroom and of the learning process. What matters is the relationship between individuals' relationships to the group, which grants the modification of individuals relationship to knowledge.

Oury and Vasquez strongly disagree with the understanding that the group always exist. In a way, they do not consider that groups exist at all. In their view, transversality exceeds the group's possible mastery. What move the group are dissonances, misunderstandings. Transversality is the crossing of individuals multiple belongings and psychic investments that appear through the variation of individuals relationship to each technique, the teacher or the group. Hence in institutional pedagogy, the teacher is responsible for introducing new mediations (to the child or in the classroom) when a child faces mental blocks in his or her subjective process. Quoting Jean Oury, his brother and Vasquez indicate:

The aim of ... institutional pedagogy is to create systems of mediations. The press is mediation; the cooperative is a mediation... that bring individuals into play about (sth). One can just retain these words '*bringing-into-play-about*'; if one observes what happens carefully, this putting at play is the more or less automatic adjustment of imaginary identifications (...) to differentiate (children) according to a law... When this play/game works, each subject finds himself (herself). The image of himself that he finds in the other, who he faces printing, is no longer an opportunity of rivalry, of seduction, etc. but the support of "what one must go through to" access a certain order. This order is instituted by the general "law" of the classroom whose technical rule (you must print this way, someone must control, etc.) is almost contingent.

Oury and Vasquez's therapeutic/clinical approach focuses on how mediations (the teacher, the group, the techniques) help « curing » individual mental blocks, so that the child acquires new powers, new modes of agency (writing, reading, calculating, speaking in public, etc.). The reference to "identification" processes is key. Oury and Vasquez introduce a typology of identifications based on psychoanalytical elements. A child's identification (to another child or to the teacher) can be partial (he or she integrates a way of doing) or complete (he or she mimics the "model" in all his aspects). The key to institutional pedagogy is that the teacher must take advantage of these identifications (that emerge from individuals' transversality) and introduce mediations that allow children to be/remain subjects along the way, to find themselves by acquiring new sources of power rather than becoming "clones" of one another (even if in a first moment they mimic each other thoroughly). Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to attempt identifying if a child's given attitude is situational or it expresses mental blocks developed from family, outside the school, or inside the

classroom. Facilitating these distinctions is the sole interest of group dynamics and social psychological tools in their view. Applying non-directivity, they argue, bears risks of ‘personality break down’ and they go as far as fearing that non-directivity departs from a naïve understanding of human goodness that has been proven wrong during WWII. Their perspective is thus focused on empowering and fulfilling children as individual and the “relationships of relationships” they observe occur among children. (Amy’s relationship to the teacher or the press as compared to Kalid’s relationship to the teacher or the press) They position themselves as teachers midway between the traditional ‘directive’ teacher who operates roughly as another ‘parental’ figure and the non-directive teacher who introduce the group as the principal authority. As Aida Vasquez says:

“Here could lay the specific role of the teacher: instead of becoming parental replacement subject for children who have been rejected individually in a neurotic situation, allowing that the classroom becomes something else than this institution that subjugates children; that it becomes a form of collective subject whose institutions enable to reinterpret what will occur in its inside.”

Lourau, by contrast, is obsessed by the problem of education as ideological practice and fears that his practice as teacher could apply a bureaucratic understanding of knowledge, which could alienate children from the process of learning. He is wary of the web of “relationships to relationships” between children and knowledge, on the one hand; and between the teacher and knowledge, on the other. We quote :

- a) The master’s knowledge is deemed complete, or at least identical to the finality of the institution (exam). The learner’s is always incomplete.
- b) the master can take distance, even criticizing or negating his knowledge. The learner must institutionally adhere to and identify oneself with knowledge.
- c) The master controls and appraises learner’s knowledge; the opposite is never true

This divide makes impossible to swap positions between the teacher and a given child and also impedes any *communication* or *exchange* between them. By contrast, the institutional dimension of self-governance pedagogy refers to the analysis of the “social demands” proper to education (or “appeal” but the French term is also in reference to the psychoanalytical concept of “demand”). For Lourau, education

becomes ideological when one obliterates the fact that acquiring knowledge (and this specific curriculum) responds to situated social demands. As education is compulsory, very specific demands intervene in school. The demand that school and society address to the children is that they adhere to knowledge and attitudes that are imposed on them. The parents' demand on the child varies from family to family but embeds a web of expectations on behaviour, friendships and professional outlooks. The teacher's demand on the child varies too, and the teacher himself is object of various social demands. Non-directivity of the teacher and self-governance of the classroom enables children themselves to both acquire the said curriculum and question its purposes and social meaning, that is, to identify the social demands relating to school they carry on their shoulders. This occurs because children depart (collectively) from their own interests and experiences to establish the learning process, and in turn compare these interests or experiences with society's views. Lourau's approach is *political* in so far he wants the children to be empowered *and* question the organisation of society in relationship to knowledge *and* be able to understand power dynamics in group organisation. Structurally, self-governance pedagogy makes the teacher's and children's relationship to knowledge interchangeable.

Thus, while Lourau regards the "institutional" approach to education an approach where the wider institution of society and its effects is brought into the classroom and analysed, Oury and Vasquez consider that the "institutional" dimension of pedagogy requires the teacher's to consider the effects of school and other institutions on children's behaviours. The teacher's intervention thus applies to the *symbolic* environment instead of addressing individuals directly. To them, the (remaining) authority of the teacher and the knowledge children's acquire are just other technique, mediations enabling the development and empowerment of subjects. These aspects are purely contingent. In other words, Lourau perceives pedagogy as "institutional" in so far it stresses the *instituting* character of collective live and knowledge – hence self-governance. By contrast, Oury and Vasquez see the interest of the cooperative in what it permits in terms of transformation of symbolic environments and subjects' relationship to symbolic dimensions – the "political" dimension of education comes thus in the background. Part of the divergence arises from the distinct

audiences their practices address. Many of Oury and Vasquez's pupils had mental or behavioural disorders, while Lourau's pupils were at most "delayed" in their learning. Could self-governance pedagogy be dangerous for psychotic children or teenagers? Is there no risk in 'pathologising' children's attitudes towards learning and the classroom as institutional pedagogy does? How to articulate these two approaches? Could any education do so? What are the implications of this reflection for society at large? In the future, we hope to further reflect on these questions by studying more closely Felix Guattari's early work, whose commitments in political groups and in therapeutic institutions and theorisation of both could be the only 'systematic' contemporary attempt to maintain in tension these two 'facets' of the relationship of individuals to the collective and to education.