

# “What Should I do as a Good Teacher?” Critical Thesis and Questions of Teaching from the Perspectives of Micro- power and Discourses

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## Abstract

*The traditional question of what constitutes good teaching has assumed a new context in the new culture of work. An apparent part of this change are the new routines in technological and virtual environments in which new methods and techniques of teaching are used among a new kind of millennial student. However, behind these changes in daily educational work, traditional pedagogical preconceptions of good teaching retain a strong influence. This indicates contradictions and tensions between past ideals and present practices. The aim of our paper is to propose a study of the ongoing cultural changes in teaching and learning. We briefly focus on the critical perspectives developed by Ivan Illich and Michel Foucault. We apply their analysis and concepts especially in regard to changes in teacher ethics. We argue that present-day teachers live in an educational reality that consists of different and contradictory discourses. Discursive practices form the atmosphere of educational institutions. From the perspectives of micropower, teachers should understand the hidden aspects of power which are present in both the old and new environments as well as in networks. In this approach the core of professional ethics is not to provide and name the norms for a teacher but to grow a critical understanding of the broad framework in which ethical practices and values are produced and possibilities for an ethical attitude given.*

## 1. Introduction

Among the genders of professional ethics, the teaching vocation is considered a “strong profession”. [7] “Strength” here refers especially to the stability and continuity of these professions. Just as in the professions of doctor, priest, judge and others, the profession of teaching has a long tradition which manifests itself also in the processes of qualifying for and achieving competence in the vocation. To develop a career as a teacher presupposes going through an established education system including degrees and practical training. On this basis the professional attains his or her position

in an institution and is recognized as an equal among other teachers.

Strong professions are also socially accepted and highly esteemed. Professionals work for the goals and purposes that are considered to promote the so-called common good. In our modern culture it is generally accepted that teachers do more than provide instruction in different subjects and skills. Instead, part of a teacher’s work is to prepare students for moral and active citizenship.

On a general level ethically strong professionalism can be connected to the modern idea of an autonomous moral subject and personal responsibility. This means that the professional is not blindly following given rules, but uses his or her own judgment by applying those rules in his or her daily work (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Knowledge is inseparable from power: power is everywhere presented to the object of knowledge [1]

On these grounds we sum up the above description and define it as the *traditional ethos*. In its ideal form this ethos could be understood as an ambition in which personal conviction and the rational general goals of institutions and society can be united in harmonious ways.

In spite of the ongoing cultural change this traditional ethos seemingly remains strongly influential in educational work, and it is also reproduced in teacher education. According to this ethical spirit teacher still want to maintain moral integrity and speak for responsibility, justice and benevolence and other values in the classroom. In this way they follow, perhaps often unconsciously, the old ideas of enlightenment, of attempting to transmit values of the common good to new generations. Despite the plenitude of tasks in the modern culture of work, teachers want to be independent moral subjects who can correct unethical issues and pursue pedagogical good.

It is obvious that in this era of cultural change, such an approach creates dilemmas that are difficult

to solve by simply sustaining personal moral integrity and following the former ethical codes of the profession. How can the traditional concept of the teacher's ethos – along with the virtues and duties it includes – be adapted to demands such as the marketing and selling of courses or the need to perform for those millennial students who have grown up with the Internet?

These questions highlight the need for analysis of cultural change in teaching to better understand ethical perspectives. We assume that a wider framework for these changes presupposes the analysis of what Richard Sennett has called “the culture of the new capitalism” [8]. In line with Sennett's analysis we could conclude that the traditional ethos is definitely weakening throughout postmodern culture of work. Yet to understand these changes it is also important to look backwards and analyse the history of how the traditional ethos was formed.

In this analysis the radical viewpoints of Illich and Foucault are significant because they open a wider framework in which the traditional ethos is also shown to be problematic and restricted. Both thinkers reveal, in particular, the phenomena of power in pedagogical relationships and sociohistorical contexts of education.

The image in Figure 2, based on Illich's concepts, highlights these contexts. It demonstrates the traditional ethos but at the same time shows how power overlaps with this ethos. It also suggests that the normative roles of the teacher are socially controlled.



Figure 2. The classic roles of teachers [5]

## 2. Teachers and micropower

When we apply Michel Foucault's critique and methodological ideas to the perspectives of teacher ethics, we must proceed indirectly through the broader framework of critical historical analysis that concerns, among other issues, the phenomena of power, knowledge, “governmentality” and sexuality. Foucault's ambition is to clarify how our culture has, in different ways, made us into objectified subjects. On this basis Foucault's vision of ethics is naturally radically different than the traditional normative ethical philosophy, which argues in different ways for universal ethical principles. From Foucault's

point of view those enterprises are unhistorical. This view also inevitably means renouncing the idea of the autonomous moral subject. He is severe critic of the enlightenment tradition.

In this wide framework of study, which includes various phases and shifts, Foucault himself was unwilling to speak about normative issues. On the other hand, when he stressed the primacy of history, he was revealing the present reality, which also concerns the formation of the ethical practices prevailing in current institutions. So, following Foucault's thinking, we should inquire into the history of educational institutions just as Foucault did with his research into prisons, hospitals and the practices which produced normality. Methodologically, the question is simply as follows: What is the history that has produced this presence?

As teachers we work in the living present, but this present is produced historically before us and the reproduction is carried on through us. Beneath the articulated and applied ethical codes and principles, however, there are hidden processes that predominate. It is these processes that form normality and set the criteria for abnormality and exclusion. When we consider it this way, we teachers are indirectly producing values and at the same time we are tied to those processes that produce us. Those values that we speak for in the classroom on the basis of our educational ethos and personal conviction become secondary and superficial.

From a Foucauldian perspective the study of teacher ethics should be especially linked to analysing different discursive practices. The concept of discourse includes normality and power. Discourses are productive and carried out in institutional ways [2]. Teachers are tied to networks of power in a special way because they “possess knowledge”. They instruct and control knowledge and are, at the same time, a part of the power/knowledge system which carries out the purposes of governing as well as controlling the population and individuals. In a concrete sense this means that conceptions of learning, evaluation practices, and different methods as well as techniques of teaching are activities that produce obedient bodies and dutiful minds.

In this connection the concept of micropower (or “microphysics of power”) is illuminative [1]. It refers to power that grows up from below and widens into biopower over the life of individuals. Discursive practices bind together teachers and students, and undercoat the atmosphere of institutes of education. Pedagogical and didactical knowledge constitute power, and in teaching they are especially connected to observation and control.

From these perspectives, summarized only briefly here, we should rethink teacher ethics in an expanded framework. Today, in the era of “culture of new capitalism”, teachers work in a reality consisting of

multiple discourses. Normative discourses are contradictory and increasingly demanding. While the traditional ethos of the teacher was based on a personal understanding of a particular subject area and good teaching skills, today the teacher has to adopt new positions and roles which come from outside of traditional professionalism. Along with a growing trend in the marketing of education, the manifoldness of technological environments is increasing. These new environments of teaching presuppose new kinds of skills for presentation and require teachers to become more personally involved. How to meet the different demands arising from different discourses? How to be effective, productive, rational, user-oriented, technologically proficient and pleasant while at the same time remaining a morally coherent person?

The most usual way to solve these dilemmas on the basis of the still prevailing traditional ethos is, perhaps, to attempt to fulfil all of these roles. This overextended, all-encompassing ethos eventually overshadows the traditional ethos and legitimizes power. Perhaps one result is also “corrosion of character” as Sennett has suggested [8].

So, as good teachers, what should we do? Power is productive and necessary, but it becomes more tolerable by uncovering its traces. The Foucauldian answer could be twofold. First, the primary task is to deconstruct discourses. This means making visible the history of differences in ethical principles and revealing contradictions in the different fields of education. This is the task of critical reflection. Second, on this basis it would be possible to find openings in the networks of power. On the level of personal ethos these openings yield possibilities for critical action and responsible teaching. In the Foucauldian sense this means also caring for and transforming oneself, practicing what Foucault called “techniques of the self” as the basis for ethics. In this view ethics do not follow moral codes. Instead, they concern the relation one has to oneself as well as to others.

### 3. The educated human being

What then is the connection between teaching and learning: Can it be measured? Should it be measured? These questions are worth asking in light of Ivan Illich’s thinking [5]. In his radically critical theory Illich argues that individuals do not learn under guidance but merely by participating autonomously in the encounters significant to themselves. Therefore, it is important to ask if the educational system can respond to this need for participation in learning or is teaching in modern societies still carried out through the ritualization of progress in schools.

Similar to Foucault’s idea of discipline and punishment, Illich stresses that in school the

prevailing idea is to create measurable learning via control systems which are based in the phenomenology of school. The fact that the research on schools and the phenomenology of schools has not changed the school structures is evidence of the need to renew the research frame. Instead, the research that will change the school structures has to start from questioning the whole institution. In order to understand school as a phenomenon, we have to understand the environment, that is, the society that makes schooling into the institution of the school

In the past and present system, we are likely to see that only attendance guarantees valuable learning. This upholds the presumption that students, in Illich’s formulation, should be strictly instructed to believe that an increase of input will automatically increase the value of the output. Learning, therefore, becomes a product, something that can be measured in degrees and certificates. There is, however, a significant difference between education and learning.

Illich [5] has argued that professional power can be defined to be pedantic, moralizing and charismatic. This power then creates the generally shared illusion that only schooled professionals “know the secrets of human nature” and it therefore “dominates the legitimation of professions”. Paralyzing professional power creates a “schooled imagination”, which is shared by teachers as well as by students. It is a state of mind where learning in schools means consuming learning elements that are the result of studied, planned and supported programmes [6].

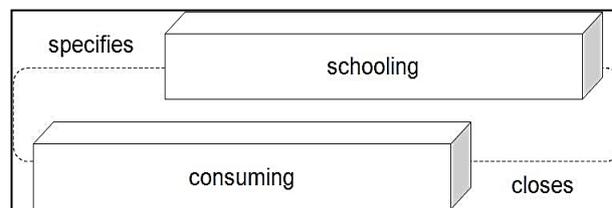


Figure 3. The process of schooling becoming a commodity [6]

From this perspective it becomes easy to see that school sells industrialized curricula, commodity collections that have been manufactured like other commodities and which are distributed personally by the professional teacher to students as if they were consumers [5].

School accustoms children to a world in which everything is measurable. The values provided by schooling rituals are quantifiable, and at the same time children are being educated in a reality where competition between individuals is more desirable than personal development. But at this point it is worth considering what personal development is.

Illich defines personal development as growth in disciplined disagreement that is not measurable or comparable to the achievements of others. It consists of creative, surprising and immeasurable learning [5]. Learning and schooling should, therefore, be understood as disparate. Education is merely defined as a product or commodity provided by schooling in postindustrial society. Several decades of trust in education has turned knowledge into a commodity [4].

In order to create a new educational relationship, it would be necessary to understand the changing world as well as the challenges resulting from technological and financial development. To be able to affect school and the education taking place at school one must ask: what makes school a school? Illich claims that the renewal of educational relationships essentially depends on a new research paradigm. Educational research trends and arrangements should be unsettled and researchers should seek to ask new and surprising questions.

Illich further reminds us that “every one of us is responsible for freeing ourselves from school and that only we have power to do it” [5].

#### 4. Teachers and the new culture of work

How can these forms of power as well as new demands be defined in the work of teachers?

We share a naive belief that there are new phenomena or sectors which can and must be integrated into the old traditions of professions. This is an illusion because all the changes are simultaneously transforming the core of teachers’ work. The proliferation of information systems and programs that measure and control daily work is a good example of the deluded modern urge to administer every part of teaching and of the learning process. These programs, however, actually calculate something other than real professionalism, and they ingeniously turn the focus to things that are measurable. Teachers and student are then, in turn, schooled to orient their activities to that which can be measured.

Why do we even think that the essence of professionalism can be measured? How can dialogue and natural communication be measured? Can intangible aspects be measured? Where is the space and time for these actions which are an essential part of a teacher’s work? (see Figure 4)

The new culture of work is constructed of actions that focus on maintaining and presenting facilities which blur the human core of educational work. For teachers this is dramatic because we are the link in pedagogical relations. This relationship consists of dialogical communication between an I and a you: Do you understand? As well as Do I understand?



Figure 4. What forms of power and control are embedded in modern technology and learning spaces?

Dialogical communication cannot be replaced by the customer relationship represented by the process of consumption. We should ask, for example, what the difference is between reclamation and critical feedback. Is teaching nowadays moving towards becoming a customer service in which the evident goal is perfect customer satisfaction? In this view teaching as a profession is approaching the entertainment industry.

We think that the culture of work is contradictory and true tension is developing within it. There are two recognizable directions.

The present direction primarily serves, step by step, economic objectives and therefore strengthens commercial goals. In this direction we tend to think that learning is the result of the curriculum and that successful learning is often bound to some other task not related to learning. Thus, school does not encourage the experimental use of talents. One might even assume that formal education maintains its institutional power at the price of narrowing its educational splendour.

The other direction focuses on non-formal as well as informal education. It is more uncontrolled and seeks new educational spaces.

Is the current education system moving into uncontrolled space where teachers and students share mutual learning goals simultaneously and, if so, is this movement an opportunity or a threat? Does a generation raised with a more permissive upbringing and deschooling need universities? These questions present an opportunity to start a conversation that produces new ideas for the role and purpose of education. The questions asked include the following: Does everyone need a formal education? Do students need degrees and certificate? Illich stresses that “a generation that has lived free of obligatory schools can create a new university” [5].

#### 5. Conclusion

Illich and Foucault see that changing the structures would not be enough. Instead, we should

be re-creating the structures or creating altogether new ones.

According to Illich we should ask what school is based on and define a phenomenology of school. Maybe it can be defined as Illich defined it: as students, teachers, compulsory attendance and age groups. We should then ask what the relations are between these dimensions. Are they necessary? How should they be rethought? These are key questions that need to be answered if the desire is to do more than just improve the existing schools [3]. Understandably, the task of rethinking education is not easy. According to Illich [5] the ritual of the obligatory school maintains the myth of the eternal paradise of consumption and renders school the only hope of the miserable and the dispossessed.

Understanding the nature of schooling demands revealing and naming its rituals and myths. Therefore, we cannot just think our way towards humanity, because this way is actualized through actions: "We have to live and work; we have to set an example of the time we wish to create" [3].

Present-day teachers live in an educational reality made up of multiple and contradictory discourses. The challenge is to deconstruct these discourses. We cannot avoid discursive life, but instead we must examine the different normative dimensions and connections to the practices these dimension produce. In this sense the field of language and teachers' ways of speaking about the word and the subjects they share with students and colleagues is not innocent. To accept given discourses does not challenge given values nor does it create a fertile basis for personal development and judgement.

In many ethical codes of good teaching one can still find a strong emphasis on the old ethics of virtue. This ethos, however, is quite incompatible with the demands created by discourses aiming at the marketing and selling of education or discourses concentrating on the new psychological skills of the teacher. Two core questions emerge from this environment: What are the forms of power and control embedded in modern technology and learning spaces, and do we as teachers recognize these phenomena?

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