

## Labor, work and action in the classroom

This is an article about [Hannah Arendt's book The Human Condition \(1958\)](#) and its relevance for the classroom.

### Part 1: Labor

#### *Animal Laborans*

*The ideals of 'homo faber', the fabricator of the world, which are permanence, stability and durability, have been sacrificed to abundance, the ideal of the 'animal laborans'. We live in a laborer's society because only laboring, with its inherent fertility, is likely to bring about abundance; and we have changed work into laboring, broken it up into minute particles until it has lent itself to division, where the common denominator of the simplest performance is reached...*

Arendt describes 'labor' as that work most in line with the biological process, associated with fertility, multiplication, repetition, necessity, consumption. In everyday usage, we may associate the term 'labor' with 'manual work', but Arendt reserves the term specifically for repetitive and repeatable processes, the (mass) production of necessary goods for consumption.

'Labor' is distinct from 'work', which for Arendt signifies the fabrication of durable, permanent products, processes with a distinct start and end, overseen by the craftsman, *homo faber*.

#### *The division of labor*

In the modern age, the principle of the division of labour, here used to describe the division of production into segments that have no meaning in themselves, has given nearly all work the 'character of labor'. Work has become 'manufacturing, a continuous process, the process of the conveyor belt and the assembly line'.

The division of labour has resulted in a society in which 'every member is the same and exchangeable':

*The sameness prevailing in a society resting on labor and consumption and expressed in its conformity is intimately connected with the somatic experience of laboring together, where the biological rhythm of labor unites the group of laborers to the point that each may feel that he is no longer an individual but actually one with all the others.*

## ***Everydayness and averageness***

This brings to mind Heidegger's subsumption of the self [Dasein] into what he calls the 'they-self' (from [Being and Time](#) p.127-128):

*This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see and judge... as they see and judge; we find shocking what they find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.*

Everydayness leads in turn to an 'averageness':

*Averageness.. Is an existential characteristic of the 'they'. The 'they' maintains itself in the averageness of that which belongs to it, of that which it regards as valid and that which it does not, and of that to which it grants success and that to which it denies it. It is this averageness which it prescribes what can and may be ventured, it keeps watch over everything exceptional... This averageness reveals in turn an essential tendency of Dasein which we call 'levelling down' of all possibilities of Being.*

## ***Classroom labor***

What is the nature of the work done in our (maths) classrooms today? Does the division of the school day into hour long segments, further divided into lesson parts and exercises, which consist of sets of questions to be solved, not have the 'character of labor'? Might the desire for repetitive and repeatable lessons lead to a school society where every member is the same and exchangeable? Might this in turn lead to an averageness, a levelling down of the possibilities of Being?

It may well lead to an education that reflects the world of work as described by Arendt; in this passage, we might replace the word society with the word school:

*For even now, laboring is too lofty, too ambitious a word for what we are doing, or think we are doing, in the world we have come to live in. The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce to the dazed 'tranquilised,' functional type of behaviour. The trouble with modern theories of behaviourism is not that they are wrong, but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualisation of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age - which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity - may end in the deadliest and most sterile passivity history has ever known.*

---

## Part 2: Work

### *Means and ends*

*The implements and tools of homo faber, from which the most fundamental experience of instrumentality arises, determine all work and fabrication. Here it is indeed true that the end justifies the means; it does more, it produces and organises them. The end justifies the violence done to nature to win the material, as the wood justifies killing the tree and the table justifies destroying the wood. Because of the end product, tools are designed and implements invented, and the same end product organises the work process itself, decides about the needed specialists, the measure of cooperation, the number of assistants, etc. During the work process, everything is judged in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end, and nothing else.*

What is the end of education? How is this apparent in the way schools are organised? What violence is done to justify the means of reaching these ends?

'Work', as defined by Arendt, is the fabrication of products for use. She describes the trouble with the notion of utility of goods produced through fabrication as follows:

*The relationship between means and end on which it relies is very much like a chain whose every end can serve again as a means in some other context. In a strictly utilitarian world, all ends are bound to be of short duration and to be transformed into means for some further ends.*

Utility established as meaning leads to meaninglessness, what Arendt describes as the 'limitless devaluation of everything given'.

We can only attach meaning through making something the end in itself. What is the use, the meaning, of the knowledge and qualifications children 'acquire' at school? Are qualifications and knowledge ends in themselves, or/and as the means to acquire something else?

The danger of making qualifications the ends in themselves is that anything becomes justifiable as a means of meeting them, at the expense of all else. This is apparent in the practices adopted in many schools today. Perhaps, then, we might ignore qualifications and make 'knowledge' the end in itself? This does not seem a satisfactory response to the student who asks 'why are we learning this?'.

Alternatively, the view of a knowledge as primarily having value in exchange (through qualifications), degrades it to the status of a commodity, thus losing intrinsic worth. Marx described the change from use value to exchange value the original sin of capitalism. In the modern age, exchange value has triumphed over use value, and there is no reason to suggest that this is not also the case in schools.

It is wholly likely that education, viewed as the individual acquisition of knowledge as an exchangeable commodity, has led to dehumanisation and alienation, and inevitably the marketisation and commodification of schools, teachers and children alike.

What can 'we' do to counteract the (what I would consider, negative) characteristics of labor and work in educational practice? In the third and final post, I will suggest that Arendt's notion of action might provide some hope for a better education.

---

## Part 3: Action

### *Action and speech*

All three activities - 'labor', 'work' and 'action' - are connected to human life. 'Labor' is concerned with survival, 'work' bestows permanence (and both are perhaps connected to mortality as such), but action is most closely associated with natality (birth):

*The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.*

Action, and with it speech, brings something new into the world, something unique, and in doing so:

*Each individual in his unique distinctness, appears and confirms himself in speech and action.*

In order to allow children to insert themselves into the world in their uniqueness, we must allow opportunities for action and speech:

*This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.*

Might action and speech provide a 'remedy', a freedom of sorts, from the routine of labor and the 'means-to-an-end' of work? What are the implications of too severe restrictions on speech and action in our classrooms?

### *Plurality*

*Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.*

Plurality, the character of human equality and distinction, presupposes our ability, and our need, to act and speak. The classroom is the ideal space for children to understand sameness and difference between humans, to discover their uniqueness, through speech:

*If action corresponds to the fact of birth... then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualisation of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.*

If it is the case that action and speech allow children to com, should we not spend time and effort to create opportunities for students to develop their ability to work with each other in a meaningful, caring way? Perhaps only in this way might we alter what Arendt calls the 'concern with self' prevalent in modern society.

## *Courage*

Disclosure of one's self requires courage:

*Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure. Courage... is present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own.*

How might we, as teachers, endow children with the courage to act and speak? At the very least we must aim to provide a classroom environment in which everyone meets each other as unique, caring individuals. [I have written about this here.](#)

We meet students as unique individuals through *our* speech and actions, both inside and outside the classroom. How we speak to, and about, students is crucial to how we meet them as individuals. Perhaps this helps explain why I am averse to labelling students:

*The moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or 'character', with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.*

## *Acting as making*

*The 'doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words' will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed.*

Action and speech have great power through their 'boundlessness', their irreversibility and unpredictability - we might say they contain great energy - but leave no trace.

There is a belief that we must always try to collect 'evidence of learning' in schools, but in doing so we lose some of the energy and power of acting and speaking through this 'mode of fabrication', by turning acting into making.

There are instances where limitation of this energy may be required. Whilst teaching, one may decide to limit action and speech in order to reduce deviation from clearly defined (content) objectives, but this may well limit other possibilities, restricting children's opportunities to 'come into presence'.

An alternative decision may be to allow unpredictability, to allow deviation from content aims, perhaps with the priority in mind of allowing the child's development as a unique individual. Such decisions depend on priorities, purposes, values. As such, in order to make such decisions, we must ask ourselves: What is education for? What are my priorities?

In any case, we should ask whether there is a place for more openness in the classroom, to allow space for the energy of action and speech, without such clearly defined ends, rather than a closing-off through excessive fabrication, through highly structured lessons, discussions and exercises:

*To act in the form of making, to reason in the form of 'reckoning with consequences,' means to leave out the unexpected, the event itself, since it would be unreasonable or irrational to expect what is no more than an 'infinite improbability'. Since, however, the event constitutes the very texture of reality within the realm of human affairs, where the 'wholly improbable happens regularly,' it is highly unrealistic not to reckon with it, that is, not to reckon with something with which nobody can safely reckon...*

The mode of fabrication is evident in the view of teaching as an 'art', or 'craft':

*The construction of the public space in the image of a fabricated object carries with it only the implication of ordinary mastership... where the compelling factor lies not in the person, but in the*

*impersonal object of his art or craft... the [teacher] applies the ideas as the craftsman applies his rules and standards; he 'makes' his City as the sculptor makes a statue.*

These are the dilemmas of teaching. In the education system as it is, we must balance the dual, and often conflicting, aims of learning subject content with developing relationships. But I would argue that relationships are what matters most; as such, Arendt suggests the restriction of speech and action towards a given end might 'destroy the substance of human relationships':

*Action can result in an end product only on condition that its own authentic, non-tangible, and always utterly fragile meaning is destroyed.*

## ***Forgiveness and promises***

If action and speech are so unpredictable, how can we allow them into classrooms without being overly restrictive? How can we trust that children will act and speak responsibly?

Arendt suggests the 'remedy' for the unpredictability and irreversibility of action are the faculties we have for *forgiveness* and *making and keeping promises*. The 'miracle' of human forgiveness allows us to trust others with the power to act:

*Forgiving... is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.*

We can forgive, and can learn to forgive. The alternative, but not the opposite, to forgiveness, is punishment. They both seek to end a chain of reactions, but forgiveness differs in that it seeks to establish a relationship with the *who* that performed the deed. What, then, can punishment offer that forgiveness can not? I am not sure:

*Men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable.*



What do we lose by being (overly) restrictive on others actions, thus not allowing opportunities for them to make and keep promises? Again, there are difficult decisions to make, which will have consequences for trust:

*The danger and advantage in all bodies politic that rely on contracts and treaties is that they, unlike those that rely on rule and sovereignty, leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are.*

I find it helpful to view school as a 'pre-society', in which children must be allowed to come into the world, to practice making mistakes, to learn how to care, to act and speak.

I feel that so-called 'zero-tolerance' approaches remove important opportunities for children to forgive, be forgiven, to make and keep promises, thus reducing valuable opportunities for them to learn how to become responsible actors in the world.

## ***Natality***

*A life without speech and without action... has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.*

Why are the ability to forgive, and the ability to make and keep promises, so important? Because they make it *possible* to live as a responsible human in society. As Arendt describes:

*[Forgiveness, and making and keeping promises] arise directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking, and thus they are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and unending processes.*

Without the ability to forgive and make and keep promises, we would not be able to act and speak, and thus to make beginnings, to start anew; natality is the fundamental fact of human existence that prevents us from ruin and destruction:

*The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope... It is in this faith and in*

*hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings': "A child has been born unto us."*

What are the implications of all this for our classrooms?