Jan Bransen

It Takes a Village, not a School

1.   Introduction

Promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all is one of the United Nations' ambitious sustainable development goals. Despite the fact that the concept of lifelong learning originally is mainly associated with an "unwillingness to accept that school is the dominant institution in all learning" (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 7) and is about attitudes and skills that enable people to continue learning throughout their everyday lives after their formal education, most people seem to think that the United Nations' SDG is mainly assumed to contribute to the creation of circumstances that offer people all around the globe the opportunity to return to some formal educational arrangement later in life.

This is, as I shall argue in this paper, to be regretted, even though it is understandable given a number of background assumptions and theories that together seem to support the idea that human beings need institutional settings to learn how to live an appropriate and truly human life. My aim in this paper is twofold. In the next four sections my aim is critical. I shall debunk four dominant assumptions and theories that constrain us to think we need schools for lifelong learning: (1) the distinction between biologically primary and secondary knowledge; (2) cognitivism; (3) interventionism; and (4) institutionalisation. Debunking these assumptions and theories is an important aim in itself, as they continue to be taken for granted in many discussions about teaching and learning. In the final section my aim is more speculative and tentative. I shall explore the idea that lifelong learning might be fueled by the opportunity and the capacity to improvise.

2.   Biologically Primary and Secondary Knowledge

Defending an evolutionary perspective on educational psychology, David Geary (1995; 2007; 2008) makes a distinction between what he calls biologically primary and biologically secondary abilities. The idea of this distinction is that there are things children learn more or less automatically under evolutionary pressure, such as walking, talking, and face recognition, but that there are other things that they do not learn automatically because evolution apparently does not require them to acquire these abilities, such as reading, writing and geometry. The abilities that are biologically secondary are only needed, according to Geary, in specific cultural contexts, and that is why the neurobiological systems that have evolved in our species are not specifically attuned to the acquisition of these abilities. Many of these biologically secondary abilities are nevertheless necessary for employment and day-to-day living

in our contemporary societies. Since acquiring them is effortful and not naturally enjoyable it is crucial, so Geary argues, that modern societies have developed a school system in which dedicated adults teach children to acquire the biologically secondary abilities they need.

The distinction between these two biologically different abilities is used by Geary to oppose "romantic" child-centered approaches to learning and education, attributed to Rousseau and his followers. These approaches recommend adults to adjust their teaching efforts to the child's natural motivation to learn, to tune in to the child's curiosity and to stay away from imposed curricula and teacher-centered direct instruction. Such a "romantic" approach, Geary argues, is fine with respect to the biologically primary abilities. But ignoring the distinction and assuming that children will be inherently motivated to acquire the biologically secondary abilities is according to Geary a fatal error.

Geary's distinction seems to support the United Nations' goal of promoting life-long learning as a recommendation to all countries to create opportunities for all their citizens to return to formal educational arrangements later in life. There are, however, at least three reasons to reject Geary's distinction.

2.1   No Empirical Evidence

Firstly, Geary's reasoning is viciously circular. The empirical evidence for the distinction between biologically primary and biologically secondary capacities is itself *not* biological. Geary introduces cultural evidence – a distinction between pan-culturally developed abilities and abilities that only develop in specific cultural contexts (Geary, 1995, pp. 26–27) – to support the claim that there is a biologically basic distinction that requires us to organize learning, teaching and development in specific school settings. That is straightforwardly circular and question-begging. You cannot claim that there is a biological distinction that requires a specific cultural setup, if you use that same cultural setup as evidence for the claim that there is this biological distinction.

The circularity of Geary's reasoning also surfaces in his use of the underdeterminedness of the concept 'necessary'. This allows him to shift implicitly between a universal evolutionary interpretation of the concept and a particularist, conditional interpretation. Geary does not give us any evidence – empirically nor conceptually – for the claim that the abilities that emerge in specific cultural contexts are not necessary for survival *in those specific cultural contexts*! That is, again, question-begging. Besides that, it neglects a crucial feature of the very idea of evolutionary survival. This is the feature of survival always being conditional on the specific circumstances at hand. After all, it is survival *of the fittest*, and 'fittest' here is shorthand for 'fittest in the given circumstances'. The very idea of *survival at all*, in *any* circumstances, is vacuous, meaningless.

2.2 No Categorical Distinction Between Human Nature and Culture

Secondly, the lack of evidential force of Geary's reasoning reflects a more general weakness of an approach to human affairs that suggests that there is a categorical distinction to be made between our biology and our culture. This weakness is already extensively discussed and was criticized almost a hundred years ago by the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner (Plessner, 1928). Plessner argues that people are artificial by nature. Our 'natural artificiality', as he calls it, flows from the way in which we are related to our own existence. As all living beings we are self-organising, but the human mode of self-organising is a mode of self-understanding, mediated by language. This means that our biology is codetermined by what we think our biology is (see also, e.g., O'Hear, 1997; Dupré, 2001). This is not to say that it is just up for grabs for us to think what our biology is. But the crucial insight here is that it cannot in reverse be just up to biology to determine what our human biology is. For we, as a language using species are essentially necessary for whatever we think that biology is.

The blunt way of putting this is to emphasize that whatever evidence there will be to underscore the limits of our biological capacities will be *evidence*. It will not be just biology. It will be a claim about our biology, cast in our language, using our concepts, using our understanding of what is biological and what is not.

Therefore, arguing that there is a basic biological distinction between capacities we are bound to develop automatically – that is, without anyone's or anything's intervention – and capacities we will only be able to develop given specific teaching-and-learning circumstances, will necessarily involve strong conceptual distinctions that themselves cannot be proven on the basis of merely and strictly empirical evidence. Thus, the fact that something is evidence implies that there is room for argument. Evidence can only play a role in our human, sense-tracking mode of self-organisation. If biology can be evidence this precisely underscores Plessner's claim that we are artificial by nature.

2.3 No Categorical Distinction Between Natural and Socially Mediated Learning Environments

The main import of Geary's distinction is that it suggests that there is a relevant distinction between abilities human beings are intrinsically motivated to develop and abilities they are only extrinsically motivated to develop. This suggestion neglects that motivation always requires conditional circumstances for its existence. Imagine a child who floats its entire life in a swimming ring. Will it learn to walk? Will it yearn for walking? Unlikely. And reversely, imagine a child who would spend its entire life among books with parents who love reading, both for themselves and also aloud to their children. Suppose the child longs to read itself, too. Would this mean that the child merely has an extrinsic motivation to learn to read?

The point here is that children do not live in a solitary void – neither the ones who would float through their childhood in a swimming ring nor the ones who would live among books. Growing up requires the presence of caring adults. What those adults

care about is part of the child's natural environment. Children will no doubt learn to talk automatically, but this is obviously because they are surrounded by adults who talk, who listen, who reply, who encourage and correct – implicitly or explicitly. These caring adults are part of children's natural environment and it obviously makes no sense to treat these parents and their care as biologically secondary contingencies. All children learn to talk, but only Chinese children learn to speak Chinese, just as they learn to eat with chopsticks. Their mode of talking depends on the Chinese language whereas their mode of eating depends on the Chinese habits. What is the difference? There is none, at least not categorically. Children's capacity to learn to speak Chinese as their first language is just as much *socially mediated* as their capacity to learn to eat with chopsticks, to learn to ride the bike, to learn to walk in clogs, to learn to swipe and scroll on their tablet.

I conclude that the very idea that there is a distinction between merely natural learning environments and learning environments that are essentially socially mediated is seriously flawed and indicative of a failure to understand the concepts of human development, learning and teaching.

3.   Cognitivism

Part of the reason why educational psychologists are inclined to appreciate the idea of a categorical distinction between biologically primary and secondary abilities, is the dominance of a cognitivist approach to human behaviour. Cognitivism was a sensible response, mid last century, to the then dominance of a behaviorist approach in psychology, particularly in the domain of learning theories. The cognitivist approach emphasized that internal processes matter. You cannot explain human behaviour by merely talking about overt stimulus-response patterns. The behaviorist black box should be opened up and the rise of computers enabled a metaphorical way of making scientific sense of inner processes by arguing that "mental activity should be modelled as the processing of information using an internal symbol system" (Garnham, 2019, p. 99).

Overcoming the behaviorist attempt to ignore mental phenomena by providing an explanatorily powerful account of what goes on inside an organism between perception and action, is obviously a matter of theoretical progress. Explaining intelligent behaviour surely requires an account of the reasons and causes that mediate between stimulus and response. Between input and output something crucially relevant happens: *cognition*, the intelligent processing of information. Understanding stimulus-response patterns requires appreciating the import of the stimulus and the rationality of the response, and that requires the theoretical means to makes sense of the internal processes that constitute or cause the emergence of these patterns.

The old Cartesian dualism that postulated the mind as an inner theatre proposed a story about the mediating internal processes but from a scientific point of view the behaviorist rightly complained that the explanatory power of an independent thinking substance is close to nil. The behaviorist alternative, however, to ignore inner

processes at all is, albeit heroically ambitious, just as shallow. Cognitivism seemed to offer a break out from the deadlock by using the computer metaphor (Fodor, 1968). The distinction between hardware and software and the associated functional account of the flow of information realised by the relations between inputs, symbolic representations and outputs seemed, mid last century, to be very promising.

The distinction between hardware and software is a powerful image of how to make explanatory sense of two completely different ways for stuff and processes to be internal to an organism (or, even broader, a 'system'). Within our skin we have plenty of organs, and their material composition is internal in a different way than their function. Hearts, kidneys, eyes and brains, for instance, are part of our bodies, organs physically located somewhere under our skin. Their functions are also part of our bodies, or perhaps we should say, more correctly, part of our *living* bodies – processes extended over time rather than static substances (Nicholson & Dupré, 2018). These functions can be taken over by artificial means as we know from the progress made by medical science. Think of pacemakers, drains, artificial hips or even dialysis machines.

Cognition, as a process, is according to cognitivism a function of the brain and once we think of the brain as a computer, an information-processing organ, the metaphorical distinction between hardware and software allows us, importantly, to understand the brain's plasticity. Just as we can use the same computer to play chess, edit video clips, calculate our budget, send emails and search databases, our brains can be adapted to perform a wide variety of cognitive tasks. All we need for that is alternative software packages – that is, alternative rules to process information.

That is where learning comes in and where the distinction between biologically primary and secondary abilities might seem to make sense. The primary capacities are conceived of as hardwired. They are part of our hardware, so to speak. The secondary capacities, however, depend on the availability of specific software packages, packages developed within, and provided by, particular cultural constellations.

But is cognitivism as a theory about cognition plausible? No, it is not. Seventy years of philosophy of cognitive science gave rise to a number of serious criticisms of the cognitivist paradigm. Over these years another, more promising paradigm emerged: the extended, embedded, embodied, enactive model of cognition, *4E cognition* for short (Newen, De Bruin & Gallagher, 2018). Especially with respect to understanding cognitive development, the distinction between these two paradigms and the shortcomings of cognitivism deserve our attention here. I shall focus on two issues: learning and qualification.

3.1   Learning to act

On a cognitivist account learning consists in the growth of the internal structure of systematically organized symbolic representations. The computer metaphor is embraced and sometimes even taken literally, suggesting that cognition is provided for by the smooth cooperation between a central processor and a hard disk, as if our

mind mirrors the architecture of early computers. This picture supports the rather general cognitivist definition of learning as a relatively permanent change in long-term memory (Shuell, 1986; Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006; Garnham, 2019) The idea is that when people learn they receive, organize and store stimuli from all kinds of sources, both external and internal. We can tell that they have learned something when they are capable of successfully retrieving the required information from their memory. Learning happens when people use their working memory (i.e., their central processor) to encode incoming, new information, integrating it with what is already known to facilitate its storage in our long-term memory, i.e., our "hard disk".

We do not merely store data in our long-term memory, but organize, structure and integrate these data using schemata, personalized organizational structures. These schemata develop over time and they are themselves stored in long-term memory, too. Think of them as small software packages, especially suited for processing specific stimuli. These schemata provide the mind with stability such that it is capable of quicker, more relevant and more appropriate responses to further information. The growth of these schemata constitute a person's experience in a specific field, such that after a while further information is not really 'new' anymore. Once this stage has arrived the person can be said to be experienced, to be an expert in anticipating the flow of information in that specific domain.

The emphasis on information-processing and storage together with the computer metaphor explains the cognitivist inclination to think of learning as an activity that is (1) predominantly focussed on handling symbolic representations, (2) significantly associated with memory and remembering and (3) strikingly indifferent to the role of the living, perceiving, affective, engaged and acting organism in which cognitive processes take place. Learning on the cognitivist account consists mainly in the acquisition of knowledge, where knowledge is primarily declarative and procedural and as such considerably detached from action. A human being who learns is, according to cognitivism, first and foremost conceived of as a subject – a judging subject – rather than an agent. This is comprehensible, given the cognitivist challenge to make sense of what goes on within the behaviorist's black box. Such a focus on internal processes tacitly buys into the idea that there are relatively unproblematic and clear-cut distinctions between the cognitive machinery on the one hand and the sensory inputs and the motor outputs on the other hand. According to the cognitivist paradigm, cognition begins when the sensory stimuli are in and is completed when the motor signal leaves the brain.

One need not embrace 4E cognition to question the plausibility of this picture once it is as explicitly written out as I did in the previous sentence. The obvious boundaries between the computer, its input devices such as a keyboard and its output devices such as a monitor or printer have no parallel in human beings. We might separate the brain from the rest of the body and might assume that learning happens in the brain but this will seriously limit learning to the characteristic symbol manipulations we associate with learning mathematics and reading. We still can see this narrowing down of learning in dominant accounts of schooling. Students are still

often – erroneously – treated as walking brains that use their bodies merely to move their brains from one classroom to the next. They read texts, memorize the information, and reproduce what they have learned in the exam.

This view of learning does not fit well with learning to walk, write, play tennis, use a hammer or cook a meal. The cognitivist focus on processing information suggests that the learning we associate with intelligence is really something different than the training of one's muscular body. Cognitivsm emphasizes a difference between knowledge and skills. Its focus on information-processing reduces its conception of agency to making decisions. Making a drawing, a wood connection, a pie, a goal or a date – from the cognitive point of view it is the execution of a series of decisions, in which the executive tasks are merely bodily performances, whereas the reaching of conclusions, the judgements, are the remarkable cognitive achievements. Separating in this way the capacity to make a decision – apparently the intelligent, mental aspect of our agency – from the capacity to execute a performance – apparently the docile, dumb aspect of our agency –distorts our understanding of our human, minded agency. This can best be argued by focussing on the similarities between engaging in two typically human activities: sports and conversations. Scoring a goal in a football match requires a lot of practice and training, the development of a habit, such that when the occasion arises one can score the goal – automatically, as it were. The automaticity suggests that in sports it makes no sense to distinguish between the decision and the execution. They happen at the same time, even in those cases in which the audience marvels at the smartness of the sportman's move. (Hendriks-Jansen, 1996)

If we compare this kind of skilled competence with our ordinary ability to engage in small talk, have a conversation or participate in a debate, we actually see the same kind of fusion between the judging and the executing aspect of our conversational capacity. Most of the time they are not sequentially ordered. Small talk unfolds automatically, just like conversations, arguments and debates. Of course, professional politicians prepare their speeches, like sportsmen prepare for their match. But such preparations build upon the ordinary habit of conversing, of taking turns, talking and listening, giving and asking for reasons, expressing what we want to say in response to what our interlocutor says. And just like sports matches, good conversations have their own dynamic. They can surprise us. We sometimes find ourselves saying things we could not have imagined or articulated beforehand. Speaking is not a matter of reporting pre-formed thoughts, but a matter of engaging intelligently in an ungoing conversation.

I emphasize the similarity between participating in a conversation and doing sports to undermine the plausibility of serious and clear-cut boundaries between on the one hand the information processor and on the other hand the perceptual input devices and the motor output devices. Such boundaries are crucial to the cognitivist distinction between hardware and software and the related idea of cognition as the processing of symbolic representations. Assuming such boundaries, however, distorts our understanding of learning, because it creates a distinction where there is

none, erroneously assuming that storing information in our long-term memory is essentially different from developing habits.

3.2   Expanding Domains of Agency

Reducing agency to judging is an implication of cognitivism that should have met with much more resistance than we have actually seen over the years. My hunch is that educational practices have played a dubious role in this respect, having obscured the inappropriateness of this reduction for those of us who have been smart enough to have enjoyed a predominantly theoretical education. Taking a written exam is an activity, albeit a radically different activity than making a drawing, a wood connection or a pie. Drawing, carpentry and cooking are crafts, that require exercise, and habituation. Of course, you can exercise taking exams and this is precisely what students do who learn to the test. But the activity of taking a written exam is itself very unlike the kind of activities you are supposed to be able to perform well after graduation. My point is not that there is ample room – as sure there is – to improve the quality and character of school exams. My point is that the regular knowledge test we so often see in traditional schooling might not be recognized as the too limited and distorted example of later activity I think it is, by those of us who followed purely theoretical education. After graduation these highly educated professionals might typically engage in activities such as solving intellectual puzzles, forming judgements, making decisions, while assuming that executing the orders they decide upon do not require any specific kind of executive skills.

This may have been a reason for thinking that there is not much wrong with a view of intelligent agency as the activity of a knowledgeable, judging subject, someone capable of acquiring and processing information to reach the right conclusion by means of sound reasoning. It is the kind of activity that typically takes place in the mind of a judge, or in the office of a manager, the kind of activity that can be pictured as purely mental. But single, independent decision makers – autocratic leaders – are getting scarce, and rightly so. Running an organisation, an institution or a business is teamwork, and it characteristically involves complex processes of interprofessional collaboration. Being able to participate in such collaborative processes requires much more than merely the capacity to judge and decide. It requires high levels of communicative skills, emotional engagement, social cognition, responsibility, empathy, hospitality, creativity, reflective self-understanding – in short, what Aristotle called *phronesis*, practical wisdom.

There is a wealth of relevant literature in the philosophy of action, emphasizing that developing one's agential capacities is not merely a matter of learning to make intelligent decisions, but requires the embodied, situated capacity to navigate wisely through social scenarios. To mention just a number of highlights: Velleman, 1989; Damasio, 1994; Schapiro, 1999; Kennett, 2001; Buss & Overton, 2002; Tiberius, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010; Bratman, 2014; Dreyfus, 2016; Bransen, 2017.

This is not the place to elaborate on the issue, but the take-home message here is that an educational focus on *agency* as an important capacity that deserves and requires growth needs a 4E-model of cognition, and seriously needs to overcome the impediments that are part and parcel of the cognitivist account of cognition as a matter of information-processing. I will come back to this in the final section of this paper.

4. Interventionism

The cognitivist image of action as a matter of making decisions, fits well with a rather peculiar, typically modern interpretation of what professionals do: *they intervene*. This understanding of professionalism has its origin in the medicalization of social practices that became popular in the social scientific literature during the 1970s (Conrad, 1992). The idea is not merely that scientists started to think of social issues – violence, poverty, deviance, addiction, etc. – as issues that in a broad sense are problems of health and illness. But more generally, it became prevalent to use the scheme of medical practice as a useful paradigm for structuring work in the social domain. Professionals could approach their issues in much the same way as medical specialists would approach their patients. Their job was to start with an investigation of the symptoms that suggested the existence of a worrying phenomenon, then to make a diagnosis, prescribe a treatment and perform an intervention which would eliminate the source of misery and would cure the service user.

This medical scheme does nowadays seriously dominate the educational sciences. This might in some cases seem appropriate, for instance when children have serious developmental disorders. In such a case it seems quite reasonable and obvious to make a diagnosis and to figure out how to design a treatment and perform an intervention or therapy. But the medical scheme seems to have a much broader scope, and did fan out over the years to much more common and indeed even completely ordinary features of social practice. Thus, we tend to think nowadays that teachers who try to determine the starting level of their pupils are making a diagnosis, for which we have invented a special technical phrase: they are doing a baseline measurement. In line with this interpretation it might seem quite straightforward to think of a teacher's activities as extended series of interventions.

We might be inclined to think that there is no evil in this language use at all. This, after all, is just what teachers do: they intervene in the developmental trajectory of their students, trying to speed up their students' learning curve. But actually, the medicalization of education – even in the broad sense in which teachers care and do not cure – is really harmful, for two related reasons. Firstly, medicalization transforms a potentially reciprocal and mutually engaging inter*action* into a unilateral and asymmetrical inter*vention*. What might – and as I shall argue: *should* – be understood as the shared activity of a plurality of agents, becomes distorted as the unilateral activity of a single controlling agent who treats the other agents as direct objects that can be manipulated and should be interfered with. Some might think my

choice of words here is needlessly offensive and I am sure that teachers do not think of their behaviour as intentionally manipulative nor of their pupils as merely passive objects, but unilateral interventions require the causal language of independent and dependent variables and of relationships between these two that do necessitate (Danziger, 1997).

Secondly, if the relationship between those who learn and those who teach is understood along the lines of interventionism, this not only strengthens the idea that students learn because teachers teach, but also fuels the idea that students will not learn when left on their own. This lines up with the set of mistaken assumptions I'm arguing against in this paper, namely that students who need to develop a so-called biologically secondary ability, need competent teachers in a formal educational setup. After all, an intervention is not just some ordinary action of the next person, but a serious, controlled undertaking that requires a competent – certified – professional working in an educational institution.

5.   Institutionalisation

Human life as we know it would be impossible without institutionalisation, that is, without the existence and development of institutions. Institutions are rich social structures that support social practices by treating individual agents as role-holders (Harré, 1979). Roles can be defined in terms of interlocking sets of entitlements and obligations, grounded in normative structures that specify agents' positions. Institutions are the social scaffolds of individual habits. They reinforce those habits, create behavioural regularities in joint action, regularities that disclose the efficacy of rules, in ways that may vary from a merely synchronized regularity to a completely reflective practice of rule-following (Toulmin, 1974).

Schools are a paradigm case of institutionalisation. Schools structure learning by offering people two ideal-typical roles: students and teachers. These roles are defined in terms of interlocking entitlements and obligations (Bransen, 2021). Students are expected to learn, to follow the curriculum, to attend classes, to study compulsory learning materials, to do assignments and take exams. They have to obey the teachers, who are expected to teach, to develop courses and curricula, prepare lessons, write or provide textbooks and exercises, give assignments and grade exams. Students are entitled to expect of their teachers that they – the teachers – fulfill their obligations, just as much as the teachers are entitled to expect of their students that they – the students – fulfill their obligations. Precisely in this interlocking way these roles are day after day reinforced in the joint actions that constitute the practice of education.

According to Arnold Gehlen, the German philosopher who has substantially contributed to the theory of institutions, one of the advantages for human life of institutionalisation is its support to the automation of behaviour (Gehlen, 1993). Without institutions, Gehlen argues, man would be flabbergasted by the world as it would show itself to be a field of bewilderment ("Überraschungsfeld", Gehlen, 1993, p. 36). Gehlen argues convincingly that in the case of education both teachers and students

are crucially relieved of the worries that would overtake them in the absence of an institution for learning (Gehlen, 1957). Without schools people would be lost. Not merely the students – for there would be none. There would be no teachers, either. Man would soon become extinct, unable to find or create stability, unable to develop habits, and thus unable to learn and to act.

Institutions are literally our salvation, according to Gehlen, and this insight applies far beyond Geary's distinction between biologically primary and secondary abilities. Gehlen would, just like Plessner, argue that this distinction is mistaken, and pointless. We would not have any chance to survive in purely natural circumstances. Luckily we do not have to. Evolution has solved our problem by creating tradition – a history of successful institutions.

One of these are schools and their presence offers us roles we can make our own, means by which we can survive. Every contemporary human being is born within a culture in which some have already become acquainted with the role of teacher, a role that offers them the entitlement to treat other people as students. This saves the lives of these younger people. Their only chance to survive, after all, is to become students, to obey their teachers and to develop the habit of being a faithful student – until they are old enough to begin to dream of a future in which they themselves will be teachers. This ambition is obviously only conceivable in virtue of the fact that our tradition has a future; that is, only because of the fact that there are schools and that there will always be schools.

One of the most important functions of institutions, according to Gehlen, is its power to mould our raw and formless yearning into well-determined, structured and feasible ambitions (Gehlen, 1993). As one of his favourite examples goes, it is in virtue of the institution of marriage that young people can give direction to their inchoate sexual drives and their longing for intimacy: *they can dream of getting married!* And in virtue of the school system we see the same kind of structured ambition in pupils and students. Rather than randomly following their own appetite, we see students who dedicate themselves to studying the curriculum and to long for advanced professional education.

The backdraw of institutionalisation, however, is that it locks our ambitions in fixed patterns, forcing us to take for granted that the only way, for instance, to become a philosopher is to study philosophy at some registered university. It is this backdraw that feeds into the common misunderstanding that I argue against in this paper, namely, the assumption that lifelong learning can only be taken care of by providing people the opportunity to return to a formal educational arrangement later in life. This may seem obvious from the point of view of those encapsulated by the schooling institution. But it is actually a mistake – the mistake to take the means for the end. From the point of view of those who spend their lives taking care of a certain institution, it makes sense to say that for them the means are an end in themselves. But the colonizing tendency of instrumental thinking should be resisted. Means are means, and never is any specific means *the only* means. Institutionalisation may be

inescapable. But it would be a logical mistake to deduce from this truism the claim about any specific institution that it is inescapable.

This concludes my critique of the idea that we need formal educational institutions to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, an idea built on four dubious presuppositions. One of them is false: there is no distinction between biologically primary and secondary abilities. Two of them are mistaken: cognition should not be understood as a matter of disembodied and decontextualised information processing and professional agency should not be understood as a matter of controlled and unilateral interventions. And one of them is not to be interpreted in a rigid and conservative way: institutionalisation is important but should be appreciated in a progressive way, with a focus on the open future of our tradition.

6.   Improv as a way of Life

An open attitude towards the future is the key to all learning (Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl, 1999). It is an attitude we have to remind the older generation of, because they tend to be misdirected by taking the four dubious presuppositions for granted. As a consequence, these older people tend to think that learning happens because professional teachers working in formal educational institutions intervene in their pupils' biologically primary inclinations, forcing them to invest the time, attention and perseverance necessary for them to develop the biologically secondary abilities that they need but that they will not be able to develop on their own. However, this attitude of the older generation is itself precisely a closed view of learning, a view that perhaps will not obstruct the younger generation to continue learning – after all, young people will just always learn – but it *does* obstruct the older generation itself to continue learning. It thereby reinforces the distorted relationship between the young and the old that results from isolating teaching and learning and thinking of teaching along the lines of interventionism.

In this final section of the paper I should like to explore whether the dramaturgical model of human action could be a conceptual tool to make sense of what is needed for lifelong learning in a tradition that is open towards the future. According to the dramaturgical model it makes sense to think of agency in terms of what happens on a stage, using the fundamental concepts – role, script, stage, scenario, actor, character, directing and role distance – as metaphorical approximations of what occurs in everyday life. (Hollis, 1977; 1996; Harré, 1979; Bransen, 2021) Key to what is happening in social action, conceived of as an unfolding drama, is symbolic interaction, a matter of shared agency in which each participant enacts their role, attributing obligations and entitlements to themselves and their fellow human beings. Many of these obligations and entitlements are to be attributed according to the script, which is a more or less explicit description of what is to be expected of each participant's contribution to the unfolding of the scenario. But importantly, the script is essentially underdetermined. No matter how complete and detailed institutions prescribe the protocols people are obligated to execute, it will always be necessary to require people

to spontaneously interpret what is going on and to give substance to what they consider to be expected (Mead, 1934).

This is a fundamental feature of life, of the fact that what happens is unfolding in real time and does always make sense in a plurality of ways in virtue of the multitude of perspectives that accompanies any group of people. A crucial implication of this fact of life is that each participant will time and again be confronted with contingent ambiguities that offer them the need *and the opportunity* to use their judgement. That is, no matter how precisely their role is scripted, there will always be moments for each person in which they will experience *role distance*. Role distance is conceptualised as the distinction between actor and character that is essential to any role even though it is most of the time not explicitly experienced. I may be a teacher – for instance a philosophy teacher – and even if I follow the textbook closely while teaching, I cannot predict precisely what my students will ask me. I may be as autocratic and as imperative as I wish, radically unwilling to let myself be distracted from my lesson plan by whatever interruption, even forcing my students to merely respond to closed questions in a prescribed manner – and yet, a student may faint, a bird may fly up against the window, the headmaster may enter my classroom, the fire alarm may go off … whatever.

The class will look at me. They may know the character I have enacted so far very well. It may have evoked definitely strong and precise expectations in them of what I will do in the present circumstances. Or it may not, because my students have grown accustomed to my strict and meticulous lessons and have no clue at all about how I will respond to this unsuspected disturbance. Either way, I may be aware of the fact that they have these or those expectations because they take me to be the character with which they have become familiar. But I'm not. I'm not merely that character. I enact it, and my awareness of their expectations of the character they think I am and of my expectations of how I will enact this character in these unprecedented circumstances will make me experience *role distance*. I will be pressed by the circumstances to acknowledge that as an actor I do not coincide with the character I enact which is the character that my fellow human beings are right to think I am.

It is precisely this acknowledgement that opens up a space for improvisation, and also the need for improvisation, a space in which I am forced to take up the responsibility for my judgement of what I think I have to do (Velleman, 2009; Boutellier, 2013). And what I will do, how I will enact the character others cannot but think I am, will be the result of (1) my interpretation of (2) my fellow people's interpretation of (3) the action they expect my character to perform and (4) the action I experience myself as trying to perform (Bransen, 2021). This entangled intertwining is characteristic of every social interaction. It is precisely because social interaction is thus intertwined that it is impossible to think of any move of any professional as a controlled, unilateral intervention. After all, the very same intertwinement occupies your fellow antagonists too – your students, and the headmaster, and your colleagues and all others involved. Neither yours nor their actions will be unilateral interventions, because what each one of you will do will be co-created by each other's interpretation of each

other's interpretation of the action each one expects the other to perform and each one experiences themselves as trying to perform.

Lots of this intertwined activity happens automatically, as if completely controlled by the script that regulates the institution within which the activity takes place. As I wrote above, institutions are the social scaffolds of individual habits. A regular class begins on a regular day in a regular school and both the teacher and the students will almost mindlessly follow the script: they have their habits; they know what to do and what to expect from one another. But whenever someone experiences role distance, interpretation and improvisation necessarily take centre stage, even when the role distance is experienced almost subconsciously, merely revealed in an emotional, bodily response (Damasio, 1994). When interpretation and improvisation take over, learning is bound to happen, the kind of learning that is essentially innovative, because a new response should be created to expand and deepen the actor's capacity to enact their character.

This analysis of the nature and function of the phenomenon of role distance is crucial to understanding lifelong learning, *and* to understanding why it requires – metaphorically speaking – a village and not a school. Schools are great for automating behaviour, for developing habits, ways of enacting a character. Schools enable us to qualify for this or that competent task performance. But schools cannot provide for the full range of role distance phenomena that we need to become skilled improvisors. Becoming a skilled improvisor is fundamentally unlike learning to enact a character. A skilled improvisor *is not* a character – exactly not. One can only become and remain a skilled improvisor by practicing role play, by authentic symbolic interaction with companions and interlocutors, constantly open to the possibility of experiencing role distance and constantly open to the challenge of improvisation. It is a capacity that requires constant practicing, quite similar to one's physical condition that you will need to maintain well in order to stay in good shape.

Lifelong learning is not about the constant need to develop new competences and new habits, nor about the constant need to qualify for new tasks. Instead, it is about the permanent willingness to unlearn, to explore, to improvise, to cope with ever recurring instances of role distance, in whatever particular role, in whatever particular scenario. That is why promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all is exactly not about offering everyone the opportunity to return to some formal educational arrangement later in life. Rather, the United Nations' fourth sustainable development goal is about supporting an open, inquisitive attitude for each and every person throughout their entire daily life in order to have the courage and to feel the space to improvise in response to occurring experiences of role distance.

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