Let's be "elitist" for entering the Jobless Society

Eric Barchechath[1]

Usually when discussing on technology and learning we mostly discuss on "potential": widen access, freeing from time and space both the learner and the teacher, learner rhythm and learning path, etc. I feel that doing so we are restraining the scope and playing the game of a sort of self-censorship which results on restricted perspectives. Based on my experience within the SOCRATES-MAILBOX project I would like to share some views in respect to two issues that are "political", political by nature and also because they require political involvement to be implemented:

- *An economic and organisational sort of issue concerns the production techniques that are used in education and their change.*
- *A social and ethno-methodological issue related to the present situation of unemployment and the need to re-orient education itself.*

Re-switching: Let's be elitist!

When I was a student in Economics, in the early 70's, it was very "a la mode" to discuss on what Joan Robinson developed as "capital re-switching" and points related to the "rate of return of techniques".

What it is? "(…)We could imagine that, as the required rate of return falls, firms would switch from less to more *capital intensive* methods of production, thus increasing the rate of investment. However it is possible to show that under quite plausible circumstances, the rate of return could reach a level at which firms would switch back, i.e. re-switch from more to less capital-intensive production methods, thus causing investments to fall as the required rate of return falls."[2]

I just would like to keep this as a metaphor.

First, "school" is an historical construct. Sociology of education has shown that both the status of children and the socialisation processes changed over the time, the modern concept of "school", as we know it, begun in the 17th Century.

At this time, only the elite is concerned with education. John Locke (1632-1704) was just considering "a prince, a noble, a gentleman of ordinary condition"[3] as addressees for the purpose of his "Some thoughts concerning education"[4].

The fact that education was for the elite, was also considered by Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670) who, contrary to Locke, was thinking education had to generalise: the first words of his Preface to his book, "Orbis sensualium pictus", says "Instruction is the means to expell

---

[1] International Consultant for Atelier, Project Manager of the SOCRATES-MAILBOX Project.

[2] Bannock, Baxter and Rees, The Penguin Dictionary of Economics, 2nd Edition, Penguin Books, 1978.

[3] I am translating in English from the French edition page 279 of John Locke, Quelques pensées sur l'éducation, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 1966.

[4] Locke was namely the initiator of a law for the poor, finally rejected but which had a strong impact: he was planning Poor' schools where children would have just received bread for food, would have worked and would have gone in church for praying.

rudeness"[1], which is clear enough on his commitment. Thinking a hundred children could participate simultaneously in the classroom, he certainly is the father of mass education. However, these days "expelling rudeness" comes back in the agenda.

The techniques involved in education at this time and the reflections associated can easily be found in John Locke's and Comenius's works. Education, does not cover restrictively knowledge acquisition, but also attitudes, behaviours, temper. And the teacher is a "master" that is someone who is acknowledged for a set of quality that are expected to be acquired by the learner[2].

Here and now, we are far from these views and certainly we don't understand the words "instruction" and "education" as they were understood three centuries ago. But if you consider the people who both have theorised and implemented new educational techniques over the two last centuries in Europe[3] you will see a set of interesting characteristics that are common for all their approaches:

- they promoted active pedagogy and condemned "courses" provision as main education tool;
- they put at the centre of their attention the learner' activity, and the activities that can be proposed to be performed by the learners;
- they had for concern not only acquisition of knowledge, but knowledge scaffolding and personality building;
- they settled specific schools settings;
- they applied mostly to primary education (including Basedow who focused on teachers training);
- they proved effective respect to personal development, and as a consequence, respect to socialisation and social integration which testify for knowledge acquisition;
- and except maybe for Freinet, whose approach was "popular", they are all "elitist" approaches.

These points are of importance as mass education with its standard settings doesn't allow to really take into consideration individual learners and their personality building.

As a matter of fact these characteristics of elitist education are those you can concretely observe when there is a real pedagogical and significant use of technology means in the classroom. This brings me to emphasise and stress the necessary transformation of schools settings and philosophy if and when the use of technology means is foreseen.

When there is a real pedagogical and significant use of technology means, I observed that the classical classroom organisation disappeared and gave way to another setting. The initial classroom group organised by row was destructured in a set of micro-communities composed of 3 to 5 learners in face to face disposal. These micro-communities have a "variable geometry" according to tasks, purposes and objectives. In a Montessorian school, you will notice a similar classroom environment.

On the one hand, many questions, problems and difficulties are solved by the learners at the micro-community level without any request to their teacher. But on the other hand, problems of characters and personalities of the learners — not in terms of their conflicts but in terms of the raising of their own identity — are emerging, expressing new demands to the teacher. A new issue of concern reveals to the teacher: s/he now is put in condition to consider each individuality not only regard to her/his scholar performances, but regard to her/his personality

---

1 Johann Amos Comenius, Orbis sensualium pictus. See the facsimile edition of the original publication London 1659, Pestalozzianum Verlag Zürich, 1992.

2 Regard to this it is remarkable to state that John Locke in spite of his responsibilities, devoted always an important part of his time to educating the children of his protectors and friends.

3 From Basedow in Germany, Lancasterism in Great Britain, Pestalozzi in Switzerland, Decroly in Belgium, to Montessori in Italy and Freinet in France.

building. Above all, it is now possible for the teacher to consider these issues and to discuss them with the learners.

My field observation suggests that the more technology means can be used to take in charge the "non-educational" part of education (information, facts, contents), the more the teachers can concentrate on education: methods, processes, reflections, links between conceptual objects, communication among the learners, communication of the learners with the outside world.

I perceive there an operation of "re-switching". In a certain way we can now go back to the old elitist forms of education: the organisational forms that are necessary to a proper use of technology in a classroom and the availability of technological means are allowing the democratisation of elitist approaches, which were nearly impossible to implement in the original context of mass education[1]. In other words re-switching means: let's be elitist…but elitist for all.

In primary education the present classroom settings can be changed rather easily by the actors because of that structural feature: there is only one "master" for one classroom.

It is not the same for secondary education which has features that blocks and locks possible change; namely, the administrative and disciplinary structures inherited from the transposition to the education scene of the juxtaposed territories and powers of the scientific and academic worlds.

How these difficulties can be overcame? I really think this should be debated publicly in all European countries, not only within the competent circles of the so-called "representative" people and institutions but also with learners, parents, local communities, locally elected people and Members of Parliament. There will be few change as long as there won't be a collective project, a shared vision, a common ambition. Let's try to open this discussion with my second point.

From qualified unemployment to job creation, a new agenda for education

Jean-Marie Albertini, who wrote a lot on education and technology used to say that if education succeed to answer huge present educational needs using present settings: "we will all starve to death but … *knowledgeable*"[2]. The present time shows that European countries are now facing a new period of severe inequality, and if starving to death appears exceptional in our areas, optimism can be considered an obscenity when facing 18 millions unemployed in Europe.

We all know in our countries the debates around unemployment and globalisation, the Dragons and the Dungeons. For it is also our responsibility, we, who are the promoters of the transformation of the educational systems, we cannot just be satisfied with introducing technology means in the classroom and improving the capacity of the educational systems to do what they did very well the last hundred years but what they are performing now with much more difficulty.

Ten years ago, excuse me for self quoting, I sketched, in a too provocative manner, some acknowledged characteristics and results of our educational systems[3] and, after many others,

---

1 For supplementary affordable cost… in developped countries.

2 “ Nous mourrons tous de faim, mais instruits ”

3 "A discipline of body, mind and emotions (which results) in the development of psycho-affective and intellectual structures: inhibition of creative aptitudes and imagination, atrophy of the critical sense, irresponsibility, affective dependence, and a relationship with power and authority in keeping with national political structures — adapted to the apparent exercise of democracy, but not to its actual exercise." in Future Perspective for the

stated they were in line with the logic which culminates in Taylorism:

- *By adapting the human capital to the need for discipline and submission to hierarchy found in the work place and in keeping with society's political and order-related requirements;*
- *By adding a certain quantity of segmented competence, knowledge and qualifications, which match up piecemeal work with piecemeal knowledge; in teaching the student that the interest of the work does not reside in the work itself but in the marks obtained, as later it will reside in the salary earned […]*
- *Lastly by ensuring a wider reproduction of elites, masses and intermediary groups by social segmentation through guidance and selection techniques. […]* [1]

The challenge we face nowadays, does it only concern the better organisational dispositions ensuring diffusion of technological innovation through a better marketing and a better capillarisation of circuits in schools, companies or society at large?

Probably not, it is much more organising schools, companies and society in such a way that they could globally put the individuals, and the networks they form, in position of being creative and innovative. In another context I advocated that new jobs creation is a matter of *individual, social and collective creativity*[2]. In order that these individual, social and collective creativity come to expression, favourable conditions are to be gathered.

If we are locked up in the perspective of the "management of penury" and the optimisation of what exists, we will never go beyond the analysis of the forms following which educational institutions can acclimate technological innovations. We are therefore taking the risk of ignoring that the key issues for jobs creation rely in people's ability to elaborate and develop new strategies and behaviours when facing unprecedented situations. Education and training are obviously the major tools to develop individual, social and collective creativity which condition social transformation.

Therefore we *must* have something to say on what is to be learned, in line with the way it has to be learned and also have to say how both can contribute to a better society, be it an Information Society or a … Jobless Society.

Even if no one can pretend to give the "raison d'être" of the manhood, for sure it is not just being Employed or Unemployed. Regard to this, some "ethical" views have to be reaffirmed for imparting a new dynamism in the education and training sector. The core issue concerns the design of a new social balance where initiatives of all types and social control settings support democratic life and human responsibility.

On the one hand: individualisation of learning, for individual reinforcement regard to autonomy, self-thinking, critical sense, imagination, initiative and responsibility; and on the other hand: communication with others, cooperation, teamwork capacities, risk taking and risk sharing. These attitudes and behaviours are both in tune with the potential of learning technology implementation and the logic of technology use.

The same philosophy of "management of penury" surfaces when education and training are mainly focusing on "competencies-and-how-to-get-them", since it is taken for granted that the key matter is to provide people with knowledge and know-how fitting with what is supposed to

---

teaching profession faced with technological change, Eric Barchechath, CESTA, FAST- Occasional Papers, European Commission, Oct. 1987. Synthesis Report. p. 21

1 Idem, p. 20

2 Organisational issues in innovative programmes and projects on education and training, Bellesi, Dondi Turrini Editors, Scienter, Final Report to the DG XXII, December 1995.

be the demand of the labour market. But we know it, it is not the case: the effort to get qualified people does not result nowadays in any jobs creation, but mainly results in qualified unemployment… for there is no jobs.

The structure of social expenses in the different European countries shows it is harder to think of the creative potential of people for job creation[1] than to organise financial support for unemployed, as if their situation of unemployed was felt both insurmountable and final. A very surprising lack of confidence in the dynamism of a Civilisation which pretends to the first place!

For sure, it is easier to train learners to gain competencies, than to train them to express their aptitudes, to have them learn on how to build on these aptitudes, to invite them to dream their future, to offer them learning environments where they are put in position of relying on themselves as well for creating new activities as for job taking.

Jobs creation can only result from investment, investment from innovation, and innovation from dreams and cultures which are giving a rationale to human action. This introduces a new agenda in terms of curriculum: culture, culture and culture. Seeking out-dated professional insertion isn't anymore of use for those who will find places in the city, since they will only find the ones they will be able to invent. The present trend in the name of "realism" to refocusing education (and also training) on possible employability of learners according to out-dated standards is criminal and counter-productive. Only culture which is immaterial can give the keys to enter a civilisation of immateriality, a view of the human potential, of the potential of knowledge, and a meaning to existence in order to… "expell rudeness".

[1] The European banking system does not allow for risk-taking and business ventures for new types of stakeholders, as labour legislation does not leave room to new organisations, as tax legislation overtax earnings that do not fit in their standard framework, as Public control systems are designed for big companies and not for small SMEs, etc