

Problem-oriented project learning and its potential as purposeful immersive education

Jakob Egholm Feldt & Eva Bendix Petersen

Roskilde University, Denmark

(1) In this paper we consider how problem-oriented project learning (PPL) as a particular form of study practice in higher education, at least in theory, enables the kinds of educative experiences John Dewey advocated in his seminal book *Democracy & Education* (1916).

(2) PPL is a composite pedagogy grounded in three principles primarily: 1. Problem-orientation, 2. Project work, 3. Exemplarity. Its genealogy is entangled with different trajectories of variations of inquiry- and problem-based education, as well as with strands of critical education with a strong Marxist orientation. Here, we are referring to PPL as sets of study practices in which students work in groups, under supervision define their research problems, and ideally choose case materials which are considered “exemplary” as micro-cosms of larger issues, distillations of recognized problems, or “fractals”, ie. small scale instantiations of large scale structures. Universities such as Roskilde and Aalborg in Denmark, and Maastricht in the Netherlands, have implemented such study practices to a high degree while many other universities use elements of PPL practices on minor scales.

Since the 1980s and the turn from knowledge to competencies and learning in higher education, PPL has increasingly been staged as a study practice with a high learning outcome. Today, in education management and policy and in theories of learning, PPL is considered good for student learning and a quintessential student-centered approach. Why be critical towards a study practice such as PPL when it is good for learning? Why do we want to reclaim it? The fundamental problem today with both organizing and marketing PPL as “effective learning” is that it is concerned with what Dewey (1916) called ulterior aims. It is continuously argued that PPL is good for learning what is sometimes referred to as 21st century skills: abstract competencies which are useful on the jobmarket (e.g. problem solving), or process competencies (e.g. learning how to learn). In this argumentation for and promotion of PPL, the “how” is completely separated from the “what”. Discourses of competencies and learning divorce practices from subject-matter, and they separate teachers from students (Biesta, 2013). Most importantly, such discourses separate the study

practice of PPL from the singleminded interest in the subject-matter, the problem, the “what”, the tangible stuff of real interest that students and teachers are absorbed in.

While we recognise that the good-for-learning perspective on PPL is a central part of its composition, we reject the narrowmindedness of considering PPL a study practice which is a “technology”, that is, an instrument used by the teaching machine to normalise certain abstract behavioral patterns among students such as the competency to work in groups, or to solve problems, or to be ready for life-long learning (Gur-Ze’ev, 2002). This instrumentalization of PPL is both intrinsic to it simply because it is a method, a set of study practices, with a variation of purposes some of which are generic. But at the same time, some ways of instrumentalizing PPL run against the unity of interest and purpose, the entanglement of what, how, and why and as a consequence the ecological balance of PPL is tipping.

(3) We claim that a reconstruction, or re-balancing, of PPL study practices would benefit greatly from a new look at one of the core sources of problem-based learning, the educational philosophy of John Dewey. We wish to explore the possibility of understanding and reclaiming PPL as a form of *purposeful immersive educative practice*, and thereby offer a critique of the current dominant ways of explaining and marketing the study practice, which emphasize its instrumental value in generating generic process competencies that are attractive to employers. To advance the notion of purposeful immersive education, we draw together Dewey’s notions of thinking, interest, discipline, method and subject matter. We are particularly interested in a certain passage in “Democracy and Education” (1916:176), where Dewey writes about single-mindedness as completeness of interest and unity of purpose, which stand in contrast to “ulterior aims for which the professed aim is but a mask”. He continues, “absorption, engrossment, full concern with subject matter for its own sake, nurture it. Divided interest and evasion destroy it”. Our re-readings of Dewey emphasize how emphatically he stresses that the subject-matter is the central concern of education, in opposition to the explicitization of generic processes. Dewey’s emphasis of the subject-matter is in alignment with his pragmatist notion of “thinking” as a practice dealing with real problems. The key notion here is ‘real’ – the *real* problem, which in universities must

always (also) be an academic problem and tied to how problems have been defined and engaged within the tradition of the discipline or field of inquiry.

We are interested in how PPL may allow for this absorption and engrossment into subject-matter to engage with real problems, which importantly in Dewey's work is always, when it is true, connected to educator and student interest, that is, the immersive experience is linked with a sense of purpose. PPL in this sense is not an assignment, a piece of assessable work set by someone else, but a piece of work intrinsically meaningful to both students and their supervisor. The question is how to create this immersive experience with schoolified students, who have become expert in meta-reflection, the use of criteria and rubrics, and human capital arguments for the worth of education. Many students, we observe, are attuned to the 'gymnastics' of studying – reading and meeting pre-set criteria and expectations in the hope of getting good marks. How and when are they able to become fully engrossed with subject matter for its own sake? Does the problem-orientation of PPL enable this, and how must this notion be shared and activated to do its work?

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Reclaiming collaborative study practices in times of instrumentalisation

Eva Bendix Petersen

Roskilde University, Denmark

(1) The practice that I address is collaborative learning, sometimes called group-work. Many universities use collaborative learning and I am interested in its current conditions of possibility and its enactments. My particular interest is in committed longitudinal group-work, where students work on a joint project for 4-5 months (1 semester) and attend a joint exam.

(2) Currently, claims are being made that collaborative learning is an effective learning activity to achieve 1) pre-specified learning outcomes and 2) team-work skills desired by the labour market. The dominant rationales for collaborative learning hark from cognitive psychology which stresses the individual's learning as a matter of cognitive growth. For example, collaborative learning within this framework is argued as useful because sharing new insights with peers optimizes the chances that the new information is more securely lodged in long-term memory. The literature on collaborative learning in Higher Education (see for example Boud et al., 2001), is strong evidence for Biesta's claims around the learnification of education (2006). The additional rationale, that collaborative learning enhances the individual's capacity as a labour market-ready team-worker, entrenches the neoliberal human capital view of the worth of education (Brown, 2015). As is evident in many universities, some effort is going into conveying this message to the students and workshops are being offered where soon-to-be-graduates are trained to translate their experiences from collaborative learning into 21st century team-work skills. This, of course, is closely related to the fact that in many higher education systems, the university's ability to demonstrate high employability rates is linked to funding and even in some cases survival.

In brief, both dominant rationales focus on how collaborative learning is good for the individual student in terms of capacity maximization. As becomes evident in the material accrued through semi-structured focus-group interviews conducted in 2018 with 24 Masters students at a university that makes extensive use of committed longitudinal group-work, students have in various ways adopted the current rationales. The material shows how it makes perfect sense among students to assess peers in relation to their capacity to assist in achieving personal goals. These personal goals may include producing better work and therefore a better grade, it may be a

goal of not having to deal with the friction that arises from working with peers with different values or life styles, or it may be that the difference of the peer will add value to their own learning experience. Common to these rationales is a naturalized form of instrumentalisation based simply on the individual's personal interests and trajectory. Conversely, the material depicts that students are commonly impatient, annoyed and frustrated by peers who do not live up to their initial assessment of their instrumental value. In the instances where they were not frustrated, they showed a remarkable expertise in citing the cognitive framework. One student, for example, expressed that he had been happy to work with a peer who in his view was less academically proficient because this peer enabled his position as peer tutor, which reinforced his own learning. Again the worth of the peer is assessed in terms of personal 'returns on investment' of his time and effort.

(3) Given this analysis, and should we wish to reclaim collaborative study practices from its individualistic interest perspective and its concomitant narrow instrumentalism, we might have to 1) offer further opportunities for universities, including its leaders, managers and teaching staff, to critically reflect on the implications of the rationales that they currently adopt and disseminate, and 2) elucidate alternative framings for collaborative study, and 3) assist students in both critically reflecting on the framings to which they have become subject and, should they wish to, assist them in envisioning and enacting alternative framings.

Drawing on the work of John Dewey, for a start, we could explicate an alternative framing to the current dominant neoliberal human capital framing for the role of the university in the 21st century (see also Biesta, 2006). As Dewey wrote "The concept of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind" (2916:97). We could, as some already do, claim that collaborative study practices are communal study practices dedicated to a notion of higher education for democracy. This, of course, would also be a form of instrumentalisation of education, but the aim of this form of instrumentalisation would exceed and critique the narrow individualistic capacity maximizing framework. The democratic framing would emphasise how collaborative study should seek to develop the knowledge and dispositions required for democratic citizenship and co-existence. As Dewey noted (2016: 87), democracy "is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience" and therefore he spoke of 'democratic aptitude', and significantly asserted the role of education in

developing this aptitude. Key markers of this are well known – citizens must be knowledgeable, critical, discerning, engaged, and understand themselves as active participants in the processes that govern their lives. In more communitarian versions of democracy, this aptitude also involves being attuned to the common good and the needs of others. Consequently, an outcome of this reclaiming might be that the student cited above would understand his engagement with the peer he considered less academically proficient differently. Not in terms of how helping him enhanced his own personal capacity but, rather, how we each help each other become what we need to become in order for democracy to thrive. Collaborative study practices hold enormous potential not only for attainment of subject-matter knowledge but also for developing experience with ‘associated living’ – for practicing listening to alternative perspectives, developing sustained argumentation, applying evaluative judgment, and more. Importantly, we should take care to not always emphasise future horizons, for as Dewey noted (1897), education is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.

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PATHES

Exemplarity and alienation – revisiting the emancipatory project of the 1970's educational philosophies

Jakob Egholm Feldt, Roskilde University

(1) In this paper, I will revisit the concepts of alienation and exemplarity as they were used in the Marxist inspired educational philosophies of Oskar Negt and Knud Illeris in the 1970s. It's my claim that Marxist inspired study practices such as project work in groups deriving from Negt and Illeris considered "exemplarity" a practice going against the alienation and instrumentalization following from curricular traditions.

(2) Today, problem-oriented and/or project-based study practices are increasingly integrated into study programs at many universities as instruments of effective learning with high learning outcomes. Universities market problem-orientation and project work as process skills which are good competencies for the job market or for future problem-solving. While this might be true, it nevertheless underlines the instrumentalization that has befallen higher education within the last 30 years (Gur-Ze'ev 2003). The motivations for using study practices of problem-orientation and project work in groups (collaborative learning) have since the strong Marxist orientation of the 1970s shifted from knowledge-for-emancipation (enlightenment) of the student to process competencies for the market place. The study practices of problem-orientation and project work in groups are still student-centered. They are based on student interest in problems and collaborative learning with peers but what it means to be student-centered has shifted. In current discourses of problem-orientation and project work in groups, these practices have become systemic tools of learning focused on the student as learner instead of the 1970s focus on the student as an active subject in relation to subject-matters.

The theories which today support problem-orientation and project work in groups are theories of learning (Illeris 2017). They emphasize how problem-orientation supports student motivation, increasingly referring to adverbial "real" problems. Students will be more motivated to learn if the problems are "real", and if what they work with has a "real" connection to companies, organizations or global challenges. Reality supports motivation which supports learning. The real has become an auxiliary for learning. Project work in groups has undergone a similar turn from a

collective, collaborative, exploration of what problems are and how they shape “the real” into a focus on the individual benefits of working in groups (Johnson and Johnson 1999). Paraphrasing C. Wright Mills, the process of understanding how private troubles are public issues has waned for individualized learning outcomes (Mills 1959: 5). For Mills, as for Negt and Illeris, the real is not a given, it is what we experience as subjects in and of historical, cultural and social processes, as power, as knowledge, as the Weberian iron cage of a teleological social order.

In the study practices of problem-oriented, project work in groups, “the case” is a cornerstone. The case refers to the materials, the data, that the students base their projects on. In some places, such as Roskilde University (est. 1972), the exemplarity of the case is still among the core principles of the educational model. At Roskilde University, exemplarity means that students must work with cases which enable them to see how smaller issues relate to broader perspectives and questions with the field in a way which owes much to Mills, Negt and Illeris (Roskilde University’s website).

(3)The purpose here is not to reclaim the ideological dimension of Marxist inspired study practices of the 1970s, but it is to discuss possibilities of reclaiming the practice of problem-orientation and project work in groups from its own efficiency as a learning technology. In the 1970s, problem-orientation and project-work was considered a practice of reclaiming the curriculum for both students and professors. At Roskilde University, texts by Negt and Illeris played an important role for the concretization of problem-oriented project- and group-based educational practices, which at the outset had the struggle against instrumentalization among its key aims.

It is worth revisiting these founding texts of problem-oriented project work in the light of recent discussions about the instrumentalization and learnification of higher education. Marxist theory had it that instrumentalization is the straight path to alienation, which is, in Freudo-Marxist terms, the basic cause behind disempowerment, or with Mills the lack of ability to see how individual troubles often are public issues. One of the solutions to the problem of alienation in higher education of the 1970s was “exemplarity” considered as a study practice emphasizing longer term student immersion into cross-disciplinary projects dealing with an example of something generally important and relevant for themselves as well as for wider societal issues.

Exemplarity in Negt's work meant the relation between "the whole" understood as historical processes of production and reproduction of orders and "the one", the fact relevant for people (Negt 1971: 27). Understanding the dialectics between the scales works against the *Entfremdungsmechanismen* which Negt understands in the same way as Mills: the lack of ability to see how individual troubles often are public issues, or issues of "the whole" (21). Every educational effort must take processes of alienation into consideration if emancipation considered as the power to act is the goal of education (21). In this way, Negt and Illeris considered this reformed principle of exemplarity a new *Bildung* liberated from bourgeois education's reproductive conceptions of curriculum, discipline, method, and tradition (Negt 1971: 28-30; Illeris 1974, 1981).

Notwithstanding its revolutionary zeal and Marxist determinism, the emancipatory project of the 1970s educational philosophies pointed to, at least, two central issues for today's problem-oriented and project work practices. 1. How can we reclaim its emancipatory dimension?, 2. How can we reclaim exemplarity from instrumentalization?

Probing into possible answers, I will, in view of the above, present and discuss some experiments with exemplarity that I and a group of colleagues have conducted at Roskilde University with a cohort of 1. and 2. semester students in the bachelor program in the Humanities.

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