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Feldt, Jakob Egholm

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Exemplarity as deliberative curriculum

Finding out what to study, why, and how

Jakob Egholm Feldt, Roskilde University

Abstract

In this article, I discuss how the principle of exemplarity developed in the 1970s by the Marxist educators and theorists Oskar Negt and Knud Illeris can be a model for a deliberative curriculum. Today's crisis-ridden discourses of 'taking back', 'reclaiming', etc., the practices and purposes of the university are evidence of a widespread experience of alienation and loss of meaning, but also of theorizations effacing practical responsibility, ownership, and deliberation. The way that Negt, Illeris, and other Marxist educators identified the curriculum as the privileged site for a new take on integrating ends and means can inspire us today with regard to taking responsibility for what to learn, why, and how. There are many similarities between the changes that spurred university reforms in the 1960s and 1970s and the current situation, considered as a crisis of the imagination. Both are basically about what to study, why, and how in the expectation of a new future. I conclude by drawing the contours of what a deliberative curriculum inspired by the principle of exemplarity might look like.

Keywords: Exemplarity, curriculum, deliberation, imagination, pragmatism

Introduction

Reading Marxist educators such as Oskar Negt and Knud Illeris some fifty years after the educational experiments their texts inspired, it strikes one that today's questions of relevance, participation, and purpose in university education were already then at the center of their concerns as policy makers and educators (Barnett 2017; McLean 2006; Stoller and Kramer 2018). Across the world, from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, new reform universities were established, and some old universities reformed, in the light of new challenges for the future. More students, new students, new problems, new purposes, new ways of discussing the purposes and practices of higher education spawned a widespread assault on ossified educational traditions (Huisman et al. 2002; Lopes 2014).

How is that relevant now? First, we are still living in the historical trajectory of the changes that led to the mass university, the democratic university, the decolonial university, the activist university, the student- and learning-centered university. Today's critical, activist, participatory universities are hardly thinkable without the reforms, most often Marxist-inspired, of the 60s and 70s. Secondly, there is a widespread criticism that those changes have now been turned upside down (Allen 2017; McLean 2006.). The university has become a business: it is instrumentalized, students are customers, research is a product, curricular practices focus on marketable skills instead of transformative knowledge. Many call for 'resistance', 'reclaiming', and 'decolonizing', and *Bildung*, despite its lineage, is often reissued as resistance currency (Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski 2020; Taylor 2017; Wane and Todd 2018; Samuel, Dhunpath, and Amin 2016). Thirdly, some of the critical and radical ideas from the 60s and 70s are still fulfilling their promises in our practices and vocabularies, as more than instrumentalized skills or commercial slogans, as also argued by McLean (2006) and Feldt and Petersen (2021). And finally, what Negt and Illeris suggested in the 1970s, using 'exemplarity'—what I and others call 'deliberative curriculum'—in

some ways resembles what we now call ‘emerging/emergent curriculum’ and ‘co-creative curriculum’ specifically in the context of higher education.

I revisit Negt and Illeris’s concept of exemplarity because I believe it can offer us an ‘old-new’ perspective on ongoing discussions about the purposes and practices of knowing in higher education (see for example Abbott [2004] and Barnett [2009]). Negt and Illeris, and the German critical theory and experiential *Didaktik* tradition of which they are exponents, have something significant to offer our current conversations about the purposes and practices of knowing.¹ Their renewed relevance lies in their emphasis on collective deliberation (community), how to engage fragmentation and complexity, and making the conversation about what to study, why, and how in higher education public. As a secondary purpose, I hope to show why Negt, Illeris, and many other German and Scandinavian language theorists ought to become better known in the English-language literature. Negt and Illeris’s thoughts represent a deliberative and hopeful alternative in (global) higher education to post/decolonial, post-humanist, and post-university perspectives, according to which the university is either dead, overtaken by evil forces, or the very nexus of injustice and imbalance (see for example Readings [1997], Samuel, Dhunpath, and Amin [2016], and for a balanced discussion of the challenges of competitive, performative universities Wright and Shore [2017]). Thus, Negt and Illeris hold critical potential not only for current curricular practices in higher education but also with respect to cynical perspectives on higher education and the university.

The discussion about curriculum in Higher Education is a complex one and in general rather recent. I rely extensively on Ron Barnett’s sustained efforts over the past more than 20 years to bring the curriculum question into the field of HE as closely linked to questions of meaning and purpose in

HE (Barnett, 2022, 120-130). Barnett and Coate (2005, 70) distinguish between three dimensions of the curriculum in HE: knowing, acting, and being. These dimensions exist in a transactional field of interests between state, market, and academia itself (see chapters 2 and 3). Pedagogy and curriculum design are in Barnett and Coate's perspective varying tools to achieve the outcomes that students know things, can do things, and can become someone (new). Inevitably, exemplarity as deliberative curriculum is linked to the critical tradition of what Barnett and Coate call "transformative curriculum" (35-37) in its Freirian sense aiming at transformation of both subjectivities and societies (see also Bovill and Woolmer 2019 for a useful overview of curriculum perspectives in HE). Exemplarity-as-curriculum's purpose could also be articulated more mildly, in a Deweyan/pragmatist vocabulary, as seeking "renewal" and the expansion of democracy and participation (see for example Shaffer et al [2017] and Longo and Shaffer [2019] for deliberative pedagogy as democratization). I use curriculum in the same broad sense as Barnett and Coate as including the learning of skills, as course design, as socialization, and as imbued with expectations from bureaucracy and society.

Throughout this study, I refer not only to curriculum discussions and educational theory directly related to the field of higher education. I take in ideas and perspectives from wider educational theory which add to the unpacking of what exemplarity could mean for a higher education curriculum. The concept of exemplarity that Negt and Illeris developed in 1960s and 70s did not refer to theories about the university, university teaching and learning, and higher education in particular, despite being very concretely about building new HE programs, indeed whole new universities such as Roskilde and Aalborg in Denmark. For one, university teaching and learning and the philosophy of higher education were hardly fields then but secondly, and more importantly, exemplarity implied a strong critique of university education as reproductive of the already existing

class and social orders. Bringing in sociology and psychology about motivation and social change as tools to understand, enhance, and change student engagement was a key aspect of the deep-seated Marxist critique of class-based higher education and of the turn towards making research and research-based knowledge relevant for people and society in general. Accordingly, it was very important for Negt and Illeris that the students were invited into the conversation about what to study, why, and how. As I will show, this connects what we today call deliberative and co-creative curriculum to an often-overlooked history of radical curriculum thinking in HE.

My study is a reconstruction of the concept of exemplarity developed by Negt and Illeris in the 1970s.² My intention is to update it, discussing its potential for present and future discussions of the ‘what, why, and how’ in higher education. Beginning with a conceptual clarification, I then move to an in-depth unpacking of Negt and Illeris’s concept of exemplarity. An important aspect of the reconstruction is a search for potentialities: how and whether the concept of exemplarity, or something closely resembling it, is used by contemporary voices in higher education literature. I examine the conceptual developments of exemplarity, both today and in the 1970s, rather than the implicated practices at universities. Still, my aim is to bring old experiments and old thoughts about the higher education curriculum to the fore, because our current situation makes them relevant once again (see also Stoller and Kramer 2018, 1–23, and Bovill and Woolmer 2019).

Deliberation and the curriculum

Negt and Illeris identified the curriculum as the nexus of the how and the why, of purposes and practices, and this is precisely the reason for their old-new originality. They conceived of curriculum broadly, as the combination of what to learn, why, and how, similarly to the approach of Gert Biesta (2013b). Thus, Negt and Illeris’s conception of curriculum was practical and essentially

pragmatic. It was not about the theoretically or technically best way to learn, but about the right way to learn considering the broader educational purpose. Today, this discussion seems essential since universities are under pressure from two perspectives, in particular, both of them intensely interested in the broad curriculum, as shown for example by Katie O'Connor (2020) in her study of Australian curriculum policy making and by Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2013) with respect to curriculum policy developments in the United Kingdom. One perspective wants more emphasis on what to learn (for purposes of employability, technical innovation, etc.) and the other wants more emphasis on how to learn. This latter perspective could be labeled 'learnification' (following Biesta), and it includes various so-called student-centered pedagogies which are today central for many university centers of teaching and learning. Both perspectives can be considered 'technical', in the sense that they use the curriculum as a tool, to achieve outcomes such as proficiency (in something) or knowledge (about certain canons) or to introduce a science of learning independent of purpose (Biesta 2014; Deng 2018; Young 2013). Stoller and Kramer (2018, 32) call both these perspectives, which are manifested in the movement for accountability and assessment in higher education, 'utilitarian'.

Recent literature on curriculum making in higher education emphasizes how these broader developments also strongly impact the universities (Kinshin and Winstone 2017; Bovill and Woolmer 2019; Barnett 2022). Perspectives on deliberative and co-creative curriculum related to higher education are in many cases perceived as a means to avoid or resist instrumentalized interests in "outcomes", i.e., what Stoller and Kramer as cited above refer to as "utilitarian" interests. Instead, deliberative and co-creative curricular design practices turn focus towards student learning processes as a way of engaging students in the what, why, and how of their study programs and as a way of expanding civility and democracy (Englund 2015; Longo and Shaffer 2019). This is

very close to what Negt, Illeris and other reformers of the 1970s had in mind, in principle, except that with the principle of exemplarity they sought to enhance the societal relevance of higher education. They were not seeking to shield “student learning processes” from societal interest, from societal usefulness, or from “outcomes”, quite the opposite, as we will see. Arguably, this deeply significant difference has to do with the differences between the feasible utopias imagined in critical and transformative perspectives on curriculum making between then and now. As pointed out by both Barnett and Coate (2005) and Bovill and Woolmer more recently (2019), there is a relative scarcity of curriculum theory related to higher education and the university. Negt and Illeris’ sustained work on reforming curricular design in higher education towards radically increased student participation can make a valuable contribution to the conversation, I believe.

We should start reinventing the curriculum (as Biesta and others also suggest) as a deliberative practice, something practical we do between students, teachers, and environments (Biesta 2013b; Connelly 2013; Priestley and Biesta 2013a; Schwab 2013).³ As noted above, I want to expound on the role of exemplarity in the educational thinking of Negt and Illeris, and on how exemplarity was understood as a deliberative curricular practice. This perspective on exemplarity may be constructive for current discussions about the future direction of university education in the light of challenges ahead. It provides us with an example of what deliberative curriculum could look like and shows what distinguishes it from more recent perspectives on emerging and co-creative curriculum.

I use the adjective ‘deliberative’ to refer to what Biesta (2013b, 686), in his discussion of Josef Schwab’s notion of the practical, calls ‘education as an event’, something that happens between people, between people and things, in specific situations, as an experiment (see also Englund [2015]

for a broader perspective on deliberative curriculum which emphasizes education for civility and democracy). This is in opposition to understanding education as a causal system of calculable inputs and outputs. Deliberation means making decisions about action in a specific situation, which is what makes it practical (Schwab 2013, 618). In the case of education, when things happen, actions are taken, and new experiences are created; therefore, the past and the future always look a little different. As a consequence, the curriculum has been changed (often slightly; sometimes dramatically), and causalities between the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ have been revised. In deliberation, the hows, whats, and whys must be considered mutually constitutive, since deliberation is about making decisions and taking action in specific situations. The concept could be expanded upon at length, but John Dewey’s definition should suffice here:

Deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action. . . . Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what the resultant action would be like if entered upon. (Dewey 2008, 132–133)

So deliberative curriculum is about determining what to study, why, and how, in a particular situation; specifically, determining how to proceed in spite of a problem, a problematic material, or questions, thus moving from a halt to a proposed course of action. The experimental nature of deliberation implies that curricula emerge from situations—paraphrasing Dewey, from various combinations of already existing habits and new suggestions—so that we imagine what a course of action might be like before actually entering upon it. This, I will argue, is a highly productive way of thinking about the curriculum in higher education.

Agency and curriculum

Agency is something achieved under specific circumstances in relations between people and between people and things. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 962) define agency as ‘a practical-evaluative capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment’. Considered in this pragmatic way, agency is a reconstruction of temporal-relational contexts (1013). The subject matter, the facts, the problem, and/or the situation both enable and condition the possibilities of action, which leads us towards a discussion of where we find the sites, the privileged places, where ends and means are combined as one. The curriculum, considered as the combination of what to learn, how, and why, is such a privileged site. Accordingly, the work of the curriculum is to enable both student and teacher agency, rather than what many students and teachers in fact experience, namely the opposite: instrumentalizing action towards calculable and generalized outcomes (e.g., Stoller and Kramer 2018).⁴ Restoring this practical privilege to the curriculum implies the restoration, or reintroduction, of deliberation and responsibility into decision-making about what to learn, how, and why. Exemplarity in the Marxist variation of Negt and Illeris was one such attempt to create a theory and policy for a radically deliberative curriculum.

Before going into a more detailed analysis of what exemplarity meant for Marxist reformers in the 1970s, let me briefly explain what I think exemplarity was and might still be (part of) an answer to. The problem is one of agency, as considered above: per Emirbayer and Mische, ‘a practical-evaluative capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects’. From the dual perspective both of what we want for our students (that they be able to do things, be someone, with others) and of what we want for the future of the university, exemplarity is a take on creating environments

conducive to student agency but also, generally, a way of knowing, which stimulates transformative encounters with knowledge, combining knowledge with both self- and social transformation. In this way, agency is not an individual capacity; it is a socially generated possibility. In a pragmatist framework, agency always happens related to something, some issue, some problem, a situation, and it cannot be possessed by someone alone. I will try to show how exemplarity's problem is agency, and in what ways agency can, and should, be thought of as a curricular question in higher education: as a question of the right way to integrate ends and means (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Without venturing into a prolonged discussion of concepts of agency, I hope that my analysis of the concept of exemplarity will make clear what is meant by agency in a practical curricular sense.

Exemplarity and Marxism in the 1970s

Oskar Negt's *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen* (1971) makes it clear that the goal of the envisioned educational reforms is to change the conditions of possibility for agency. Negt writes that experience in educational work has taught us that the communication of information, separated from social and political processes, confirms already existing power relations (26–27). As a Marxist of his time, Negt is concerned with 'workers'' possibilities of changing their social situation; claiming their political, class-based, voice; and gaining more control over the outcomes of their work. Negt's central claim, inspired by such different sources as C. Wright Mills and Martin Wagenschein, is that the mere communication of (scientific) information in education is an 'oversupply', caused by certain means of production that alienate people and create a misery of 'matter' (*Stoff*). This misery is a product of the oversupply of discipline-specific information combined with a lack of imagination about how things are related. Introducing meaningful agency into this desert of information demands both a collective and an individual

imagining about how information is related to social and political processes, to life in general, and to future paths. Information *related* to temporal-relational contexts—whether cultural, social, economic, etc.—that have pasts and futures means situating individual and collective experiences, making sense of experiences, and opening up for new action. Without the (re)introduction of purpose into ‘information’, we are overwhelmed and effectively disempowered. Interestingly, the very same argument is made today for why we should rethink the humanities (and other fields) in the face of the climate crisis and other global challenges (Andersen and Jacobsen 2020; Rosa 2019; Sörlin 2018).

For Negt, the purpose of education becomes motivation for social action. Seen from the perspective of Dewey, Mills, Rogers, Freire, and other progressive educators, this is not new or particularly radical, but Negt views education from the perspective of critical theory, in the light of Europe’s 20th-century historical experiences, seeing it as being just as much the problem as it is the solution (Gur-Ze’ev 1998). In Negt’s view, education must be under democratic control, and he is deeply critical of internally generated purposes for education and science that can, without reflection, turn into tools of suppression (Langston 2010). Democratic control over ‘bureaucratic and administrative’ decisions depends on whether the complexity of information can be translated and reduced into alternative political viewpoints relevant to people. As a consequence, the cardinal problem of education becomes educating towards the ability to translate scientific subject matters into languages and thought patterns through which political and social orders and problems are articulated (Negt 1971, 26), in other words making information and science a purposeful tool for social agency and the understanding of society.

With this educational and political agenda, Negt, Illeris, and other like-minded reformers focused their attention on the organization of the subject matter (*Lernstoff*). In order for students and teachers to be able to use the disciplines, and disciplinary information, as purposeful tools of action, a unified perspective addressing overarching questions of relevance and reasons had to precede subject-matter organization. Such a perspective makes a technical curriculum—one focused on the transmission of information, skills, and the best ways to work vis-à-vis external goals—virtually impossible. The ambivalent attitude of Negt, Illeris, and many other Marxist reformers towards the university, as both reproductive of social orders and a critical greenhouse for new social action, led them to an extremely ambitious program of collective deliberation between teachers and students over what to study (Illeris 1974; Berthelsen 1977, 11–29). In the view of these reformers, producing scientific knowledge and using information in a way that is purposefully related to broader goals demands both command of the disciplines and a historical and sociological view of them at the same time.

For this double educational purpose, Negt, Illeris, and others created a reformed concept of exemplarity based primarily on Marxist sociohistorical dialectics and Martin Wagenschein's didactical methods, drawn from experimental science teaching in Germany in the 1950s and 1960s (Graf 2013; see also Korsgaard 2019a). Here, it is important to stress that the purpose of Wagenschein's exemplarity was to be an entry or access point primarily to the disciplinary sciences (but with some looser notions about also being an entry to the wider world). Negt and Illeris's perspective was different. It was about finding the right way to learn, in the face of social problems and in collective deliberation between students, teachers, and materials, in a way that placed political agendas above knowledge, science, or learning itself. The overarching purpose was social action, and while deeply infused with Marxism, it was in principle not an ideological program but a

political one, in the wider sense of acting together with other people, which in significant respects was not that far from the pragmatism of John Dewey (1916) in *Democracy and Education*. Inspired by Mills, Negt held that the conditions of possibility for genuine social action only exist when people realize which structurations they are part of. Only then can we know that we are not atomized individuals but groups, within certain conditions, which come to exist as political and social problems when we can see them. For Mills (1959, 3–24), this enlightenment was the job of sociology; for Negt (1971, 83–95) it became the job of the educational program, thus in many ways submitting education to the meta-view of historical sociology.

In Negt's (1971) reformed model, exemplarity is a deliberative curriculum emerging from historical and social challenges (*historischen und gesellschaftlichen Aufgaben* [25]). Inspired by Wagenschein, he claims that examples are not steps on a ladder towards increased and general knowledge but a mirror of totality, which leads him to the following definition of the (reformed) principle of exemplarity in education: "The whole" is the organized totality of the forces of production and reproduction in a given society in its historical dimension; 'the particular' is the sociological fact that is relevant to the life of society, classes, and individuals" (27, my translation). Exemplarity in this variation is an ongoing reorganization of the subject matter, and in principle it entails a permanent, ongoing rewriting of all learning materials (*Lehrbücher* [26]), as a practical endeavor related to present and future social challenges and individual liberation from structural forces. The 'organized totality' is a division of labor that produces and reproduces society and which must, in Negt's view, be translated into the particulars as a whole if we want the particulars, the facts, to make sense as mirrors of a system of production. Again, materialist/Marxist historical sociology is the science behind education.

Finally, Negt gives rather specific directions regarding the exemplary organization of the subject matter (96–118). The quality of the examples used as teaching material is to be judged on these parameters: 1. their closeness to the individual interests of the students; 2. their relevance to general social issues; and 3. their liberating potential. We can see how this program can be read both as an open invitation to participate in discussions about relevance, the general interest, and freedom, and as a preprogrammed ideological attitude that already knows the answers before the questions are asked. Negt and Illeris's writings in the 1970s were ambivalent, in principle advocating the deliberative, open interpretation of the exemplary organization of subject matter, but nevertheless relying exclusively on a Marxist sociohistorical framework when drawing up the basic purpose and direction of the ideas and reforms.

In the 1970s, Negt's reformed principle of exemplarity was a matter of curriculum, of the right way to learn for democracy, societal reform, problem-solving, and liberation, but at the same time, in many ways, its Marxism made it technical, caught in Marxist sociohistorical dialectics, with a strong desire for revolutionary outcomes that arguably hindered the imagination more than it stimulated it. Nevertheless, the reformed principle of exemplarity was thought of as an ambitious educational answer to problems of disempowerment, fragmentation, and information overload, a path toward purposefulness, democratic responsibility, and new futures as a way of creating and acting with knowledge. The privileged site for such change was the curriculum, considered as a combination of why, what, and how to learn.

Exemplarity in higher education today?

In the field of higher education today, the principle of exemplarity, as part of a wider, practical concept of curriculum in the Negt-Illeris sense described above, has been almost forgotten, though

it has recently begun to regain currency as a way of building relationships with the world. For moral education particularly, but also with respect to what Biesta calls ‘world-centred education’, exemplarity, or ‘the example/the exemplar’, is central to new educational and pedagogical thinking emphasizing how ‘educational questions are fundamentally *existential* questions . . . about our existence “in” and “with” the world’ (Biesta 2021, 90; Korsgaard 2019a, 2019b; Nielsen 2019; Warren 2019). There was also a shift in focus away from the reorganization of subject matter and collective deliberation in the writings of Illeris and other former radicals after the 1970s, albeit in a different tone: Illeris (2016) turned toward learning theory and ‘the learner’ from a sociopsychological perspective, arguing for exemplarity as a way to motivate students to learn, in fact changing the purpose quite radically.

Currently, as I see it, there are at least three strong variations on exemplarity that are relevant to higher education, all of which address aspects of what examples do well in education and why we would want to focus on them. One is related to moral education, understanding exemplarity as the educative effect of good or bad examples; another is related to case study methodology; and the third is related to critical perspectives on education as calculable in- and outputs, considering the problem for higher education of what Stoller and Kramer (2018, 31) call ‘the utilitarian movement’. In the following, I discuss these perspectives in comparison with Negt’s reformed principle of exemplarity, with the purpose of untangling what we are talking about when we talk about exemplarity today; I then use this discussion to suggest an alternative path for the curriculum conversation in higher education going forward.

Heroes and villains

In her article ‘Time and Exemplarity’, the historian Anne Eriksen (2017) shows how early modern education made use of examples as a way of guiding behavior and advancing theories about power and the state. Saints, priests, and regular people in divinely inspired moments were taken as educative examples of what was promoted as eternal values (Eriksen 2010). The examples instantiated the good and moral behavior and the national or self-sacrificial values that educators considered necessary to pass on to future generations. By pointing to the instantiation of certain values in particular situations or with particular people, educators could appeal to the concrete, tangible reality of events (however mythical) instead of the abstract values of religion, nation, or civilization. Thus, these exemplary people functioned as teachers standing in for eternal values or principles, educative heroes by their own example, a religious or metaphysical function that reaches back to the earliest human civilizations. As Eriksen (2017) explains, this kind of exemplary education is basically outside of time. It considers the hero, the villain, the devil, and/or the drama to be without a context, without a time or place, existing not under specific conditions but in eternity; in this perspective, exemplarity largely becomes an uncritical and basically unmodern educational principle. It reflects a premodern attitude of *historia magistra vitae*, history as life’s teacher, in which history is not necessarily temporal and contextual but rather a collection of good and bad examples, essentially moral narratives, to learn from (Koselleck 1985).

Interestingly, this perspective on exemplarity is still strong in moral education (Zagzebski 1996, 2013, 2017).⁵ In recent works, educational philosophers consider this kind of exemplarity to be a pedagogical principle worth considering given what we know about learning. From the behavior of their teachers, through the emotion of admiration for a hero, students learn what it means to be wise, critical, compassionate, funny, as Zagzebski (2017, 30–59) theorizes: through direct reference and indexicality, pointing a finger towards the ‘that’ which ‘is’ good or wise. This clearly includes

learning both from the positive examples of such admired figures as Nelson Mandela and Greta Thunberg and from our fear and disgust for such figures as Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin. But as the names given here illustrate, such exemplarity does not reflect thinking in the sense of Negt and Illeris's critical theory: thinking that leads to independent judgment as opposed to upholding traditions, hierarchies, and cultural/religious idol worship. The perspective on exemplarity presented by Zagzebski and others is closer to the premodern *historia magistra vitae* described by Eriksen and should be considered as belonging within a trajectory of religious education, which is also the perspective that Zagzebski (2004) takes. The examples of Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, and other religious heroes are among the strongest moral exemplarities ever created; for millions of people, how they acted in specific situations is admirable and exemplary.

We must fundamentally question whether this version of exemplarity holds any purposeful educational worth if independent, thinking people are both the ends and the means of higher education. This is not to say that we should not learn from good or bad examples—this of course happens by itself all the time—but as a purposeful curricular practice, it is very different from the deliberation that Negt imagined over what, how, and why to learn. Admiration for heroes is educational, but it also reflects power, and no matter which way we turn it, its dark twin is despotism.⁶

The paradigmatic case and exemplarity

From a practical perspective, organizing a curriculum around the study of cases that have been instrumental for more general understandings of this or that sounds exactly like organizing around a principle of exemplarity. Nevertheless, Negt (1971, 30–31) differentiated between cases and examples in his presentation of the reformed principle of exemplarity in the early 1970s. For Negt,

cases are either one of a kind or one in a long line of examples. They are not exemplary just by being a case of this or that. While he considered cases effective as entries to problems in the same way that Wagenschein thought of examples as good entries to natural science education, Negt nevertheless found it necessary to clarify that cases are not exemplary unless treated as such. This is an important distinction, since case studies fundamentally rely on instantiation, the use of a *case* of something that can be treated in an exemplary way, demonstrating connections between instances and structures, contingencies and causalities.

Negt's exemplarity stands in opposition to the kind of case studies that study something in its own context without raising it to a general level. With characteristic rhetorical certainty, he pronounces such studies useless, as representing reified, or 'thingified' (*verdinglicht*), thinking, without any real educational purpose (31). It is fair to say that Negt has a very limited idea of the variations in case study theory and methodology, which include rich discussions of many of the very issues he raises. Flyvbjerg (2006) outlines five standard misunderstandings case studies have been met with, ranging from their lack of generality, through their confirmation bias, to their only being good for making hypotheses but not for testing them.⁷ It seems that Negt is focused on the lack of generalizability, but not in the same way that Flyvbjerg presents. Flyvbjerg sets case methodology against large sample studies, but generalizability for Negt has nothing to do with the size or representativeness of the sample or case; instead, it has to do with how the case is treated and the overall purpose of creating knowledge in a certain way, i.e. the best vs. the right way, in Negt's perspective.

Considered as a curriculum organized along principles of exemplarity, case studies, or case methodology, cannot automatically be considered relevant. Yet some types of case study, which Flyvbjerg (2006, 230) calls 'the paradigmatic case', resemble the principle of exemplarity because

their purpose, according to Flyvbjerg, is to create a metaphor or establish a school, a tradition, of thought having such a case as its master example. The paradigmatic case is strategically chosen and purposefully communicated, but there is no definition of what exactly constitutes a paradigmatic case. Flyvbjerg quotes Dreyfus saying that it is a matter of intuition. Reasons are made up post hoc (232). Examples of the importance of paradigmatic case studies for connected, critical thinking about structures are abundant. Such types of case studies can be said to touch upon central features of exemplarity because they carefully select and forcefully communicate cases as exemplars of something general, as a guiding metaphor or trope for explanation.

Studies of trains, gardens, prisons, cockfights, airports, workplaces, schools, the Galapagos, various technical innovations and many other things have all made paradigmatic cases for our understanding of the particular facts of people's lives in relation to a socially and historically produced whole. They have become guiding metaphors for understanding connections, thus inspiring and inciting often critical action and helping us find 'black boxes' to explain our current experience or helping us see groups that have otherwise disappeared from of the structural view. The paradigmatic case is a strong current instance of a method that is close to the principle of exemplarity as a way of knowing. Case methodology discusses different ways of working with case studies in relation to good science and representativity rather than curricular or didactic policies and principles. Yet the effect of paradigmatic case studies is an increased wholeness of view, and they thereby enhance the conditions of possibility for action with others.

Against the machine

Taking my cue from Biesta's recent *World-Centred Education* (2021), this section discusses positions that 'still live in the shadow of "Auschwitz"' (100). The perspectives I will discuss range

from critical theory to deconstruction, through world-centered positions inspired by Hannah Arendt; from Oskar Negt's more recent writings to decidedly deconstructivist positions such as that of Irene E. Harvey. I call this section 'against the machine' because it sees exemplarity as counter-educational education, or as the happening, the event, of becoming educated: as the self-enlightenment of education, to paraphrase Adorno and Horkheimer. This range of understandings of exemplarity is not utilitarian, yet it does not oppose societal usefulness; it opposes didactical objectivism, technicality, what we could call 'learning' considered as best ways, strategies, technologies, of learning, in a generic, evidence-based sense. As we saw earlier, with Negt's writings on exemplarity from the 1960s and 1970s, a central concern within this range of ways of understanding exemplarity is the impact of the educational system itself on the limiting of thinking, action, and future possibilities. Education itself is a problem for education.

In 1981, Knud Illeris (1981) devoted a book to 'counter-qualification' in the educational system. Counter-qualification means an organization of education that takes into account the controlling dimensions of education and gives education to the actors—the students and teachers—as purposeful political activity that draws from their own experiences. Political here does not necessarily mean ideological but rather meaningful deliberation with others, purposeful collective action towards the future, based on knowledge (35–62). In the early 1980s, such a position was surely still a socialist, Marxist position (as Illeris made explicit), but broadly speaking, the position can also be considered what we would today call 'student-centered' (11–15). But 'the student' in Illeris's perspective is not just a learner whose learning requires the best didactical methods; the student is also a subject and a citizen in whose interest it is to understand a social whole and be able to act within it. In this way, counter-qualification was thought of as democratizing education and empowering the student as a purposeful learner, subject, and citizen.

Exemplarity is in this respect a comprehensive educational as well as political thinking, through which the students as learners, subjects, and citizens are invited into a critical reorganization of the curriculum. While Negt and Kluge (1988) emphasized the role of publics and saw historical sociology as the metascience, Illeris (1981, 69–92) increasingly emphasized student motivation, subjectivity, and accordingly treated (social) psychology as the metascience guiding education. In both cases, exemplarity is more than a didactical entry point into fields or disciplines: it is a critical principle addressing the problem of education as power and participation, disciplinary specialization versus problem-oriented inquiry. Illeris explained how exemplarity is the experience that enables students to relate their personal troubles to wider public issues, a subjectivizing, emotional experience when you *feel* that you are a part of a whole and your concerns as a student in higher education *matter* (17–18). Illeris wrote that the principle of exemplarity and counter-qualification ‘give opportunity for working with the understanding of society which can result in the development of new psycho-social structures connecting a more correct understanding of society with an improved potential for action’ (115, my translation).

Let me now briefly turn to the other end of the spectrum on exemplarity, represented by Irene E. Harvey’s *Labyrinths of Exemplarity* (2002). In this philosophical book, Harvey presents exemplarity as a destabilizing problem and opportunity. She asks a number of related fundamental questions, starting with: what are the conditions of possibility of examples? She then investigates these questions through readings of Aristotle, Rousseau, Derrida, and many others. I include this as an illustrative example of educational thought on exemplarity that does not accept that the particular is part of a whole (an assumption that informs both Negt’s and Illeris’s thought). Harvey’s main agenda is to disrupt the particular/whole binary that guides much thought on exemplarity in

education. She replaces this binary with a semiotic distinction between exemplifier and exemplified, thus creating an opening for a much more complex relationship between what might best be considered parts of the example (see Korsgaard 2020 for an analysis of Harvey's version of exemplarity).

Harvey (2002, 17) reminds us that Negt and Illeris would probably not be too happy with detours away from the educational telos, because that would include the potential of not closing the intended learning circle. This contamination, within exemplarity, by the potential detour away from the purpose is in itself critical of the educator's guidance, which can only become the right exemplarity a posteriori. To put it more straightforwardly: from Harvey's perspective, exemplarity on different scales and at different levels of abstraction destabilizes the origins of the model, of both example and whole (Kray 2018; Toracca 2018).

I end this search for language about exemplarity in contemporary higher education with a perspective on exemplarity that takes more inspiration from Hannah Arendt than from critical theory. In his vast corpus, Gert Biesta (2021) has developed what he calls a world-centered perspective. While I cannot here do justice to the richness of Biesta's work, I will simply draw attention to his notion of indexicality, of pointing, to what is happening, to the example (75–89). Biesta does not use the concept of exemplarity, but his thought is nevertheless inspirational for further thinking, for instance the thinking of Morten Korsgaard (2019a, 2019b, 2020) in his sustained work on (re)conceptualizing exemplarity for wider educational research and teachers' education. Neither Biesta nor Korsgaard develops their ideas for higher education in particular, nor considers exemplarity explicitly as a matter of curriculum, as I do here.

In the perspective represented by Biesta (2021), examples are where the world comes in and calls for the attention of the student. Here, it is not the specific quality of the examples themselves that is important but the gesture of pointing to something, directing the students' attention to *something* (75–89). Examples are disruptive and demanding. They call for a shift of attention, from its initial focus to somewhere else. In between the example and the student is the act of pointing. In this way, the (pointing to the) example calls the student, saying 'hey, you there!' In this movement, subjectivity happens, because 'you' are called upon, but what you want to do with the call from the world is up to you. The example, or in my terms exemplarity, elicits questions of what to do (with the call from this something), and thus requires individual judgment in a given situation (also a point made by Korsgaard [2020]). Biesta (2021), inspired by Klaus Prange, claims that genuine education takes the form of pointing. What comes out of this gesture can only be seen later, in another situation; it cannot be calculated as an a priori cause and effect.

Exemplarity as deliberative curriculum—going forward

The ways of talking about exemplarity that I have sketched out above point in different directions. First, the ways in which we talk about exemplarity today are both reduced and expanded. Exemplarity can be good for student learning processes, or it can be rather abstractly critical towards educational outcomes, as understood by the evidence movement. Secondly, exemplarity risks individualizing motivation to a pop-psychology emphasis on the immediate interests of the student (being 'student-centered', as also pointed to by Biesta [2021]), instead of on the collective, deliberative reorganization of the curriculum. Thirdly, talking about exemplarity as a metaphor, a synecdoche where the part represents the whole, implies an overly simplistic view of the complicated relations between parts and wholes, of causality and temporality, and of the creative-imaginative dimension where exemplarity *becomes* as a result of certain actions, as also discussed

by Harvey and Korsgaard. One way of reintroducing the potential of the principle of exemplarity would be to reconnect it to the conversation about the curriculum.

So, why should we consider Negt and Illeris' principle of exemplarity today vis-à-vis higher education curriculum design and the broader theorization about the purpose of higher education? First, the principle of exemplarity represents a different politics of knowledge (what I earlier called 'way of knowing') than most of today's student-centered approaches, as I have shown. Essentially, it was not about "teaching and learning", it was about social transformation and the role of higher education in such change. Accordingly, it is more precise to call Negt and Illeris' variation of exemplarity "society-centered." Secondly, the principle of exemplarity was radically cross-disciplinary and problem-oriented as a core aspect of its politics of knowledge. It included a continuous and deliberative reorganization of the *Lehrstoff* as both a principle of democratization but also as a critical intervention into society's power politics: the opening up of the power of definition over which problems were the most important and pressing. In such case, the co-created curriculum happens as work with, or inquiry into, problems as defined by the participants, as opposed to being defined by disciplines, parents or prime ministers. Thirdly, revisiting this explicit Marxist curricular thinking of the 1960s and 70s poses a troublesome question for us today: are we in a crisis of the imagination, in a situation of imaginative poverty, since focusing on student learning processes have become its own critical purpose?

The implication of this is that students should be asked not to reproduce curricula (for the preservation of a territory) but to participate in the practices that shape and reconstruct curricula around inquiries and questions. The information overload and the obscured consequences of the

organization of knowledge that Negt referred to as problematic in 1971 are even more so today. They dissolve the premise of the traditional curricular overview, the reproduction of an ordered landscape, and thus the very premise of ‘disciplines’ (Barnett 1999, 2000). Instead, we could think about the curriculum as only emerging after we have a question, a problematic situation, doubts, referring to something specific, an example, which opens up trajectories between the past (experiences) and the future (expectations). The curriculum emerges as work. Some of this work has been done, and repeated, so many times that institutions have been constructed around it.

Recently, as part of a discussion about how John Dewey would organize university studies, Aaron Stoller (2018) has aptly called something similar to what I describe here ‘flipped curriculum’. The acquiring of the knowledge of the curriculum here refers to taking adequate action with respect to the example that is calling for attention; it means using the work within the relevant line of inquiry to reconstruct a trajectory that connects the past/before with new possibilities ahead. Exemplarity, and the flipped curriculum, turn the meeting between students, teachers, and materials into a specific collaboration about the emerging of the curriculum through deliberation over which decisions of action to take in response to a specific situation. In Stoller’s (2018) words, ‘the purpose of the curriculum is about gaining deep embodied familiarity for our environment, the cultivation of critical agency, and sparking passionate desire to create meaningful change’ (455).

If, as I asked above, we consider the current crisis in university education as a crisis of the imagination, and more specifically a crisis of what Ron Barnett (2015) describes as feasible utopias, then reclaiming the practical agency of making decisions about what to study, how, and why would be a starting point for meaningful change (63). The outcome of engaging scholars and students in collaborative reconstruction processes of curricula can be thought of as the renewal of responsible

communities within the university. Hopefully, I have shown how the principle of exemplarity, considered as deliberative curriculum, can inspire renewed thinking about how to reclaim meaning and responsibility with regard to what to study, how, and why.

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¹ Graf’s 2013 PhD thesis, about exemplarity in the German *Didaktik* tradition, unfortunately only exists in Danish.

² The background theoretical inspiration for this conceptual reconstruction is conceptual history from the perspective of Reinhart Koselleck (1985) and ‘pragmatist genealogies’ considered as histories of the present (and future), as expounded on, for example, by Colin Koopman (2013).

³ I won’t go into the rich discussion of Joseph Schwab’s notion of the practical, but Schwab’s fundamental perspective on the curriculum as something practical and deliberative is close to the implicit notion of the practical in the work of Negt and Illeris.

⁴ The literature on the “instrumentalization crisis” of the university is substantial.

⁵ See also the discussions in Korsgaard (2019a) and Nielsen (2019).

⁶ Zagzebski (2017, chs. 5 and 6) addresses some of the concerns I raise, but the main issues remain, I think, when we consider moral exemplarism within a discussion of educational purpose in higher education.

⁷ I am referring to Flyvbjerg’s superb overview of mistaken criticisms of case studies. Flyvbjerg refers to the state of the art within case methodology.