

# Education is Self-Education

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*This is an edited version of an address by Hans-Georg Gadamer, presented at the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Gymnasium, Eppelheim, on 19 May 1999. The text has been edited and translated by John Cleary and Pádraig Hogan.<sup>1</sup>*

Ladies and gentlemen, as you see I am a feeble old man and you must not therefore expect that I am now at the height of my productivity or even my wisdom. In any case it is somewhat dubious to claim to be at the height of one's wisdom. For all that, when one is such an old man, one can undoubtedly say: I have accumulated a great deal of experience. But in truth, my attitude towards you is really strange, as I would really like to learn so much from you. I would need to know how things stand with school today, what are the concerns of present-day parents, what are the concerns your sons and daughters have, and all of that which I no longer know. I have doubted whether I can feel qualified to speak about it. We have already agreed, otherwise I would like to prescribe it, that we hold a short discussion, so that I do not detain you too long as an audience.

I will try to establish why I believe that one can learn only through conversation. This is of course a very sweeping declaration, in support of which I had, in a certain sense, to develop my entire philosophical efforts in recent decades. If I were obliged to select a title for today's lecture or address — as you see it is not a lecture, and I regard it as a dangerous atavism of our academic lives that one still speaks of lectures. To lecture is not to speak, as these are two different things. When one speaks, one speaks to somebody, when one lectures, then this paper lies between the speaker and the audience. Of course there is nothing written here except a few key phrases that I have noted down for myself and therefore I take it up only for a moment.

But if I were obliged to select a title, I would propose the following: Education (*Erziehung*) is to educate oneself; cultivation, or formation, (*Bildung*)<sup>2</sup> is self-cultivation. By means of this title I deliberately set to one side whatever problems will naturally arise between the young and their elders who educate them, whether teachers or parents. I want to consider this entire field from another perspective, because it dominates the real debate and I will attempt to bring matters into greater focus.

So I begin by asking myself, who is it who really educates? when does education really begin? Now I do not want to engage with the particular

findings of the newest research that investigates the communicative bond between a mother and her unborn child. Certainly there is already communication here, though quite clearly not of the spoken kind. On the other hand it leads to a very interesting question with reference to the newly-born child: where begins that which we undoubtedly see as the basis of education for each person — namely, learning to speak? Here already lie all the mysteries that arise for a later time, such as for professional development, as we call it. Certainly, at this (pre-linguistic) point one can begin to make the first observations about the new-born child. In the subsequent months the child begins with certain games, trying to grasp at everything and appears to be contented and even proud of the fact that it can understand something. The child cannot yet really grasp or yet really wish, but for all that one notices its contentment and its first feeling of well-being. I almost said its sense of being at home. And that is the first enormous task for a new-born child. It cries out also because it cannot yet deal with being suddenly exposed to a completely strange environment.

Now if in this manner we try to imagine what is clearly the second new step vis-à-vis the first: it involves the first year of learning to speak. An incredibly interesting year, as we all know, and one full of surprises for parents. No matter how ingenious the free use of early speech, it does not remain the case for human speech. But that is a loss that shows itself sometimes. We all know that words or names from childhood language can cling to a person's vocabulary for a whole lifetime. There is a further step that one must make here. One has to devote one's full attention to this step, even for assigning one's own name by a sort of osmosis from parental usage of words, and similarly for the names of animals and so on. With reference to the giving of names to things, this topic is obviously important to study.

Thus, we ask ourselves: who educates here? Or is it not rather a self-education? It *is* a self-education, such as I detect especially in the satisfaction that one has as a child or adolescent in trying out things, when one begins by imitation to use words one does not yet quite understand. Finally one manages to say it properly and then one is proud and joyful. Starting from these first observations we must proceed so that we never forget that we educate ourselves, that humanity educates itself, and that the so-called educator participates in this process only in such modest roles, for example, as teacher and as mother. We will see all that is involved in this self-education. If I can recollect from my own childhood, and that of others which I am familiar with from my own family life, that is a good illustration of what each person somehow or other carries within him. Clearly, it involves a decisive turning point in these years of learning to speak when, after being mainly with one's parents, one next begins to attend the kindergarten and then elementary school. This is surely a greater step, through which something really new takes place between, so to speak, 'the cradle and the grave': I mean the communicative relationships with others.

I had a daughter, and once in a while my wife had to ask — we had a home-help person at the time — she had to ask this person to wrap the child in swaddling clothes, but afterwards the child always cried loudly. In the beginning I had to do it myself on one occasion and in my wife's view — certainly she was right — what I had contrived was quite frankly a kind of straitjacket. But consider this, the child beamed and then fell asleep. So it is with communication, about which we still have no inkling, but which still accomplishes this process of feeling at home, which I cannot emphasise strongly enough as the key idea of any kind of education (*Erziehung*) or cultivation (*Bildung*). Also cultivation (*Bildung*) cultivates itself. Focusing on the so-called school education (*Schulbildung*), we realise that it always carries this particular emphasis: namely, all that is involved here is what has already formed itself in a hidden way. These processes are not, as we say, particular specialisations, rather what is really signified here is something like general education (*allgemeine Bildung*). Of course this only develops slowly.

The kindergarten today is naturally in a process of development, the exact details of which we do not know. The secrets and difficulties of the field of education today are very wide in scope, and have been plagued and ultimately endangered by the industrial revolution. That means, for instance, that mothers of young children are more or less forced into full-time work. We must also see that this holds for most of the population, even where it concerns people who are not under such pressures. After all, from the child's perspective, the father who is more often than not absent is an unsettling experience. But when the child is completely dependent on the parents, what happens when both go out to work? I have learned to notice this in America especially. Generally, we first discover what is problematic by noticing it elsewhere. That is at least wise and thus I had an opportunity to get to know the United States quite well. And it is very necessary to clarify what such examples signify. For instance, when I remarked to a colleague who sat at his work: 'But you also have a family, two children'; he said: 'Ah that's not so bad, they sit in front of the box'. You can imagine for yourselves the problems this father has in the meantime, if he relieves himself of responsibility in these early years through allowing excessive viewing of the television by his children. Of course he has made a dreadful mistake here. One cannot overestimate in such cases the dangers the mass media pose to the humanity of children. Above all else, that humanity involves learning how to develop and guide one's own capacity to form an opinion. Indeed that is not at all easy.

These are the sorts of (communicative) problems that begin within the first school years, after the initial steps have been taken in the kindergarten. With what do they begin really? Above all, they begin with one's many school-mates, not all of whom one likes and yet some of whom one likes. The entire interplay of likes and dislikes, sympathy and antipathy that is typical of life in general, likewise happens in school. The poor teacher has at best a modest role if he wishes to influence these processes. Where the home has already completely failed, in most cases

the teacher will not be able to achieve much more success. But these are obvious things that I do not need to elucidate. I simply want to point out what depends on this. It follows from this that, in one way or another, the young human being makes himself at home (*einhaust*) in a world. This is a word (*einhausen*) that the great philosopher Hegel has used. He could venture, through his own reflective usage, to coin new terms, for example: from 'hausen', (to dwell) to 'einhausen' (to in-dwell). Making oneself at home in the world (*Sich-Einhausen*) reveals itself also in this courage for creating new vocabulary of which I already spoke. This age is very interesting.

But this 'world' of the family, as we saw, experiences a tendency towards levelling and conformity, first in the kindergarten and then in the school years in earnest. There, something new is demanded and this shows itself in many ways. A quite different beginning occurs here with the business of learning to write. Now, learning to write! Everyone will immediately have an opinion on this, and I do not even know precisely how it is practised today. But previously, one learned how to write before one learned how to use a writing instrument. Obviously I realise that writing then played quite a different role. For all that, one knows that there is this particular thing called school-writing. It is taught in school and it becomes one of the most interesting ways by which we recognise human development, i.e. when from such school writing one's own handwriting develops. I don't know if this symbol of personal distinctiveness will last long. Probably it will soon be the case that there is no such thing as handwriting, or if so, at most for signatures. But it was always a particular speciality to make one's signature illegible. These are issues that lead us to others that plainly belong to the field of education.

I return to a key point, namely becoming aware of the enormous importance of the mother tongue. As we can see, this is really something in which are hidden unsurpassable capacities that one should not underestimate. The mother tongue will retain its place in the future world with complete security. I have been often enough in America and in other continents to know the respect given to family traditions, and above all to cherishing the mother tongue. That is the case in America on a large scale. In California for instance, there are many Japanese and Russian villages or towns and so on. One ought not let oneself be misled by the development of business languages, which are now almost exclusively dominated by English, in Europe at any rate, but soon in the whole world. This is not what I am talking about. Rather, I am talking about the vernacular in which one asks questions and holds conversations as one is growing up. However, one does not normally hold conversations on the phone. But there are people who do, and that is very bad for those who want to telephone others. The phenomenon is well-known. There is even such a thing as gossip addiction. Yet the desire for conversation is a good quality if it is practised in a moderate way. But I want to stress here that in a decisive way one's native language will even be preferred by those who grow up wholly or partly as polyglot. Again,

it is not unusual for the father and mother to speak one language within the family, but then to speak a different language with other people. There are all kinds of such possibilities.

Now the mobility of populations is a whole new issue that arises with the industrial revolution and, in addition, there is the fact that we are increasingly engaged with the learning of foreign languages. I can only remark with astonishment that for a long time the significance of this fact did not appear to influence educational practice. That practice no longer takes the form in which we were all schooled in foreign languages, namely through reading a text and through writing. That is not the normal way of learning a foreign language. The normal case is through conversation, and this is something I cannot emphasise strongly enough, that it is actually in such conversation that our social world has its growing possibilities. Whoever is used to speaking only in dialect inevitably regards people who speak High German as being immediately a bit strange. It shows itself in that one always sees a little more of what language means to others. I am firmly convinced of this point: that far too often we view the learning of foreign languages as a one-sided relationship and not as an understanding of each other. Naturally we have good reason in learning a language to learn the necessary skills which belong to it, which certainly include reading. Thus one understands that this expertise has a certain scope that is given preference in formal courses of study. But, ladies and gentlemen, grant me the conviction that it becomes very dangerous if one sees a formal course of study as binding. It would be bad if that were to happen everywhere. Fortunately, it does not, but still it is far too much regarded as the most important feature. The most important feature in my own view is to be able to answer when one is asked, to be able to formulate questions oneself and to be able to accept corresponding answers. If it were the case that I really had something to say here — but really I have not — then it is this, that for each 45 minute period of formal teaching in foreign languages, at least ten minutes should be held free for questions. That would undoubtedly be a lesson plan of the best kind. This is especially the case where one is dealing with foreign languages such as English or French.

In the case of learning Latin it is another matter. With Latin, one can finally learn to understand grammar. Sadly there is the barbaric practice of cramming the grammar of a native language (i.e. a language spoken as a vernacular). I recall the only flop that I had as a child in school — you can imagine that I was a fairly good pupil. When in third class I had to learn the German declensions of 'I' (*'ich: meiner, mir, mich; du: deiner, dir, dich'*) — I still know it by heart — then I found myself suddenly among the dunces, where I never found myself with other things. I failed to gain a pass and I had to be thoroughly drilled in it until I knew it. Although it is naturally quite comical to hear it, I recall it now as the sort of problem one typically has in this connection. It is really quite consistent: this kind of grammar is not developed from German, but is rather carried over from Latin. But that is surely quite clear. There in

Latin one has the grammar necessary for the formal learning of foreign languages, and the names for that purpose are all Latinised — it has always been so and thus it will remain. Whoever has not yet mastered Latin will have difficulty in grammar.

Thus I revisit my childhood experiences in school. Another example: I have had the experience in my youth and I believe all of you in your own ways may have had it — where a teacher stops himself from digressing, declares ‘but this is not yet for you’, and returns to the lesson plan. One never forgets such a thing! This is doubly interesting. One sees here what is not important and one notices what *is* important: to awaken the desire to learn. You are also familiar with the strategies that one adopts as a pupil if one is badly prepared, so as to prevent the teacher from putting this or that question, whereby one distracts him with more difficult examination questions of one’s own. Obviously we have here a kind of guerrilla warfare. I will in no way disparage such strategy and tactics. They have always been present and one should acknowledge them as being at the heart of teaching. To learn a language is not necessarily to write it flawlessly, but above all to know how to speak and to answer.

I remember of course that I was at school in 1914, in the unhappy war years. I was at a school that had a similar curriculum as that in this school here, as I have ascertained. I learned French as my first foreign language, with a phonetics book for the whole year! I could speak no French word for a whole year, but developed French sounds. In those days that was the great progress in German phonetics, which was already practised in towns such as Breslau. I am afraid that later the practice again became otherwise. But a preoccupation with phonetics was usual at that time and so, even now, my French pronunciation does not attract negative attention although I have never spent much time in France. I make other mistakes but my pronunciation is good and for conversation that is more important than the grammatical accuracy of what I say.

There is now also a general observation that emerges from these reflections: how important the continual presence of others is for our being-in-the-world. Just as this (the experienced quality of relationships with others) plays a role between children, so it plays a role between learners of foreign languages. And so arises the reciprocal character of self-education. It also applies to the role of parents, or of whoever otherwise takes care of children. I think one can imagine how all of this (experienced quality of interaction) proceeds, how it continues step by step, so that one always at the end receives lasting characteristics. Thus, in human conduct, manners should not take the barbaric form that at every opportunity one displays them unnecessarily, but rather one should give everyone the opportunity so to conduct oneself that the other person can feel comfortable and vice versa. In this case education, properly speaking, is a more natural process which, I believe, everyone undergoes through the effort to understand the other person in a well-disposed way.

Now I begin to focus on the question: What does one learn here? How does one educate oneself? What is that cultivation (*Bildung*) that cultivates itself (*sich herausbildet*)? In response we tend to identify 'Allgemeinbildung' (general education/liberal education) and we mean by that, what is in fact very significant: that one does not attempt to specialise too soon. I believe that this is now very much the order of the day in Germany's high schools, that one does not pursue specialist studies so much. There is however a field that is of particular significance, and that is mathematics. I can assure you that I have had friendly contacts with very many mathematicians, including people of first rank, Nobel prize-winners and such like, and I have often had conversations with them on this question of early specialisation. The conclusion was invariably that the best students were from the humanities because they had learned better how to work, and they had learned no false mathematics. Genuine mathematics is too difficult for the schools. That is plainly a fact. That is not to say that we must give it up, but we must be conscious of the point that it is no evidence of promise for later mathematical studies if one had good marks in it in school. Here, one must completely learn afresh. I can underline this as a very significant state of affairs from conversations with my colleagues in the Mathematics Faculty in many universities. The point is not restricted just to mathematics. There is something like a sixth sense, or *sensorium*, for what one should know, or what one wants to know, which can really show itself through practical applications in one's interactions with others. It is this that one needs to reach an understanding with others.

Now we have reached the central point of what, in my own philosophical world, I regard as a decisive perspective; namely that only in conversation does language fulfil itself. To be able to realise this in practice is a limited possibility, even for the teacher. It is of course quite clear that certain uniform units of study must be followed, but the decisive point is this: that one ultimately develops in teenagers the capability to overcome their lack of knowledge through their own initiative. Self-education must above all consist in this, that where one perceives one's shortcomings, one strengthens one's own resources (*Kräfte*) and that one does not relinquish this responsibility to the school, or rely on school grades, or on school reports or on whatever is given a premium by parents.

Do not think that I am speaking here on unfamiliar matters. It is the privilege of a reflective old man to say: 'the world has changed'. In what way then has it changed? Undoubtedly, the art of handwriting is, of course, no longer developed. Definitely, a loss. One will have to become accustomed to the most diverse kinds of typescript, which will continually improve. Such writing will become ever speedier and, by this means I believe, we will save time. But we must learn to put this time to good use. We will gain even more time if we refrain from what I have already described as use of the telephone for gossip. Obviously we must learn to deal properly with the modern means of communication, so that

this kind of communication loses the threat it otherwise must have. One reflects now on what was once taken for granted, namely that one ought never to invite anybody to visit one by telephone; rather, one had to write a letter and such like. It is quite clear why, and on what grounds, many new things now confront us. But within these, developments, new demands are also hidden.

And without the formation of groups, how should such developments happen in the universities, or even in the schools? Likewise associations. That we must study. Thus, I am a very big champion of the advancement of all civic associations, because in them human being-with-one-another is being practised. This being-with-one-another (*Miteinander*) — that is the core word — is the means by which nature has, in fact, raised us above the world of animals, precisely through language as communicative capability. That is the point that I am striving to make. The initiative for this must lie much more with the young people themselves. We have all had to learn this, and each young person will likewise gladly learn it also in specific contexts. They will for that purpose join new circles when they begin to attend university. It is no longer the classmates, the old school pals — a precious thing for people — who have grown older and see each other again. Where one has had intimate attachments or new experiences which one shared with others, one has here a really vivid experience that slumbers in each of us like a binding power.

In the case of the universities I can already see it quite clearly (the absence of being-with-one-another as learners). Here we have very large lectures in which there are hundreds of students. The professor cannot recognise the talented ones, nor can the students recognise among each other those who are of like mind. It is a hopeless bustle. It is to be hoped that sometime or another this will change. I see it happening in American and English models, and in many countries it has happened already. But now, what is the problem here? Initiative and the capacity for judgement! Or is it to recommend the right book: though not because it is advertised in a periodical. There are always such false advertisements, that is, advertisements which one would be better to ignore. Then what is it that is really worthwhile?

I recall what was important for me when I left home and became a student. Suddenly I came into contact with female students — it was the time of the first war — a circle of cultivated and nice girls, and there I learned something quite new. Indeed, I recall that in the year 1918 I had read a book by Theodor Lessing called *Europe and Asia*, because it was recommended to me. This was a new world for me. That was the well-known Theodor Lessing, a Husserl disciple, who was a left-wing journalist and who later on fell victim to an assassination. He certainly had some sarcastic and disagreeable sides to his character. I will not rate him highly as a genius but I would not want to have missed the experience which I enjoyed at that time through my readings. I was deeply impressed when I learned about the newest intellectual development at that time, namely the critique of the productivity



ethos which had previously dominated everything as an optimism about the future. At that time I had begun to read the Russian novels, and the great Scandinavian and Dutch novels and also those others where the translations were readily available. And in this way one educates oneself. This kind of self-education is particularly necessary in the universities today, because today the mass media tend to dominate everything and because now indeed even more specialisation is promoted in the curricula and professional training courses at the universities — despite the name ‘universities’. If we consider the scientific works that are submitted for the title of Doctor (PhD) they have, to a surprising degree, become confined to specialist accumulations. This can, under certain circumstances, yield fruitful research contributions, but the key experiences that it provides for one’s professional judgement and education are inadequate for the task of survival and becoming at home in the world. Today it is much more the case of conforming to what is in fashion, so that one cannot readily go against the trend if one cannot substantiate it with a citation. One must, however, be able to take a risk, even when the outcome is not clear. That is a concern that we hear a lot today, that also in our economy, there is far too much rule-following and avoidance of risk. Who really has learned then, if he/she has not learned from his/her own mistakes?

Now I cannot give judgement on this; I am too remote from it to make a judgement, but I still maintain that the humane capabilities are the ones to stress if one is to educate and to cultivate oneself, and that only then, when we succeed in that, will we also survive without damage from the progress of technology and technicity.

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## NOTES

1. See the introductory essay by Cleary and Hogan, ‘The Reciprocal Character of Self-Education’ in this issue.
2. There is no precise equivalent in the English language for the German word *Bildung*. To translate it with the English noun ‘culture’ is to confuse it with the German *Kultur*. *Bildung* is a concept

with a rich history in German intellectual tradition, which Gadamer reviews at some length in the opening chapter of his major work *Truth and Method*. This review, which traces the development of the concept of *Bildung* through work of Herder, von Humboldt, Hegel and others, highlights the point that *Bildung* is a verbal noun that refers to practices of becoming cultured. That is, it refers to practices of human learning which become increasingly refined, nuanced and self-sustaining. (See the accompanying introductory essay 'The Reciprocal Character of Self-Education' by John Cleary and Pádraig Hogan.)