

## To Make Agamben Intelligible Within Educational Thought

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In my response to Harvey Shapiro's interesting and thought provoking essay, "To Give an Example is a Complex Act': Educational Intelligibility and Agamben's paradigm," I would like to focus on the idea, of which I see his essay as being an example, that we can use theories mainly formulated outside the field of educational theory in order to say something fundamental about education. Shapiro does not only show, with great insight into Giorgio Agamben's work, that this is possible, but he also shows quite convincingly that by focusing on Agamben's understanding of "paradigm" he is able to bring out something fundamentally educational from within Agamben's thinking. And this something has the potentiality of actually transforming the way we understand educational theory today, by hermeneutics on the one hand, and deconstructive educational theory on the other, as Shapiro demonstrates. Shapiro argues implicitly as well as explicitly that if we read Agamben's conception of "the paradigm" within such an educational context we can see how paradigmatic education not only differs from both but also how it brings something more or new to our understanding of education in general and curriculum design and pedagogical conduct in particular. Paradigmatic education and teaching basically differ from those other educational theories, claims Shapiro, in that an example functions as both typical and exceptional, and exposes the intelligibility of the context in which the example is situated, which neither of the other two traditions of thought accomplish. For instance, hermeneutic educational theory tends to interpret "preexisting phenomena or pre-understandings" as sources for the example, thereby running into problems of representation, while deconstructive educational theory, in focusing on the very instability of language, only exposes the minimum of intelligibility of language. Paradigmatic education, rather, exposes how the very "taking place" of language "allows for the otherwise ambiguous to become 'perfectly intelligible.'"

A paradigmatic understanding of education, says Shapiro, functions within curriculum design and pedagogical conduct as an orientation that "potentially engages students and teachers holistically and singularly, rather than simply as beings in need of a limited, presupposed kind of knowledge." Paradigmatic education then is not only a theoretical discussion delivering a potent critique of reified knowledge, but for Shapiro such education can also inform practice and challenge instrumental understandings of education, which has an overbearing trust in "scripts and excessively deterministic standards."

While I am convinced that reading Agamben can indeed be a way of transforming the way we understand education, I am not convinced that the result of such reading by necessity ends up in transforming educational thought. My question to Shapiro then can be formulated as follows: is "to give an example" (complex or not) by a teacher who practices "paradigmatic teaching" different from learning the

lesson or having the world explained for you and made intelligible by a master teacher who is him or herself in absolute control? That is, in what ways does “paradigmatic education” break out from the limits set by tradition, politics and institutions, from what Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup> called an education geared at stultification of the learner? Is paradigmatic teaching that which explodes the limits put on education by an institution not only marked by inequality (and in certain instances celebrates inequality as its goal and task), and is it something which instead gears “the learner” toward freedom and intellectual emancipation? Is there a risk, larger than the potentiality of the “paradigm,” that when “paradigm” becomes “paradigmatic teaching” within an educational discourse, it automatically becomes reduced to a form of *explanation* of “the potential of classes to be comprehended” rather than a form of *emancipation* of those who are to comprehend “the analogic relations among singularities and provisional sets”? What I am asking is this: is there any emancipation in Shapiro’s Agamben or are we caught, yet again, in the web of (power) relations between the Master teacher who knows already and who is ambitious enough to explain to the rest of us how the world is, in epistemological, ethical, and ontological terms. That is, when we claim to bring out what is educational, what are we actually then bringing out?

In a discussion with Tyson Lewis, and through him with Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, Shapiro avoids the most obvious difficulties of “learning” discourses, in that such discourses by necessity tend to reinstall “inequality,” he claims, not only between the concepts or classes of “teaching” and “learning,” but in my understanding, between people embodying those concepts and classes, as teachers and learners, in a particular “web of power relations” at a particular time and place. If we add Agamben’s conception of “study,” as used by Lewis, to his own “paradigmatic teaching,” Shapiro states that we have “an important alternative to the learning’ model.” Without really explaining for us what such an alternative would look like, Shapiro claims that paradigmatic teaching “can never be a dimension of a deficit-oriented model of learning,” where learning becomes consumerist (which is the main critique). Not the least since paradigmatic teaching exposes something more than what can be contained by the concepts themselves, something more than what language can contain. It exposes, through the example as paradigmatic, “potential webs of intelligibility,” a kind of “‘guaranteed’ potentiality” within particular contexts.

So where does this potentiality take us? Shapiro says that it presents education with “the possibility of resisting the presuppositions of categorizations of people and events and recognizes the individual case’s potential to open up new worlds.” This is all fine. But “resisting” does not automatically create or expose the “potentiality” of something being different than what is resisted. It may even be claimed that the very act of resisting confirms that which is the case already and fixates it as the norm. Does Shapiro’s paradigmatic teaching provide any tools to move us beyond such fixations? Or do they operate within a fairly traditional understanding of education, one that says that its task is to “open up new worlds,” by being attentive to

“individual cases,” and thereby resist presupposed “categorizations of people,” things and ideas.

When applied to curriculum such a paradigmatic educational approach would “thus challenge educational policies that deskill teachers with scripts and excessively deterministic standards.” Again, that is all fine, but I am not completely convinced that we need paradigmatic education exclusively to do that; or, that paradigmatic education alone can discharge inclusion/exclusion just by exposing “an enduring potentiality for ways of being and communicating together” in an educational community. For this to be a possibility at all I would say one would need to develop an understanding of an “educational community” beyond its idealized versions and rather direct attention to the inherent inequality of social organization within educational communities.

Shapiro argues convincingly for his case in this thought provoking essay with its detailed understanding of the example and the paradigm. But it is also the case that I think the essay stops short by not moving beyond a confirmation of what appears to be a post-political version of education. Is this all we can get from Agamben, or can a paradigmatic education also bring us something more and profoundly dangerous for our very understanding of “education” — and not simply in terms of variations on what we are to do within already set frames of “curriculum” or “pedagogical conduct”? I would like to think there is. As an extension of Shapiro’s argument about the paradigm/example, I wonder what implications, if any, it might have that Agamben also calls “the camp” a “paradigm” for how we can think the function of “the example” within institutionalized education. Rather than reproducing a fairly traditional understanding of education and teaching, I wonder if such “examples” actually have the potentiality to offer educational theory something more, beyond the “fixed” boundaries, categorizations and classes of post-political education to the context of intelligibility?

With this said, I do think Agamben via Shapiro has something valuable to say to education. Particularly when paradigmatic teaching injects difference, movement, and change, when it operates with an open definition of the moral, the individual or knowledge, and when education is understood in relation to the potentialities of freedom actually “taking place” in the here and now. But to follow through on these ideas, I do think it would be necessary to push more at the limits of curriculum and pedagogic design than Shapiro does, limits set by a post-political version of educational thought.

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1. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).