

## REASON AND RESPONSE-ABILITY

Tim Ingold

### Introduction

For more than three centuries, in the western world, education has been regarded as the engine of social progress. It has been the means by which advances in human knowledge, forged by bringing the powers of reason to bear upon the material of empirical observation, have been passed from one generation to the next, allowing each to build upon the achievements of its predecessors, thus contributing to the advance of civilisation as a whole. An education that conforms to this progressive principle naturally gives pride of place to subjects of study that are deemed, in modern parlance, to be *academic*. For as a place of learning, the academy – be it a school, college or university – is founded on a claim to superior knowledge of how the world works, at least as compared with the knowledge of so-called ‘lay practitioners’ which, by contrast, is so tightly bound to experience as to remain out of reach of explication and analysis. Almost by definition, academic knowledge situates itself on a higher plane, at one remove from the messy theatres of practice in which it might be put to use, if at all. That’s why academic study typically separates learning from doing, the transmission of knowledge from its subsequent application.

The effect of the academic model, however, has been to push to the margins a range of subjects that appeal – as we might say in our modern idiom – more to sense than to reason, or to standards of perfection more aesthetic than logical. It is not that these subjects – from art and craft to music and dance – have no place in the curriculum. On the contrary; even in a society wedded to the ideal of progress, there is widespread recognition of the need to complement the detached objectivity, cold logic and analytic rigour of academic study with something more subjective, more attuned to feeling, empathy and holistic understanding. This bifurcation is, after all, deeply sedimented in the modern constitution. We even have scientists, nowadays, telling us that it is wired into the human brain, in the division between its left and right sides! An education in non-academic subjects, we are told, should help with the development of the right side, tempering the dominance of the left, and offering students a more rounded formation that enhances their abilities to relate to their surroundings.

I intend to argue *against* this left-right complementarity of academic and non-academic education, with its implied divisions between objective knowledge and subjective experience, and between reason and expression. My contention is that what we may broadly call ‘the arts’ have a far more radical role to play than merely to provide the academic curriculum with its non-academic complement. This role is to change the very meaning and purpose of education, across every field of study, from the efficient transmission of knowledge from teachers of one generation to students of the next, to an endless journey of discovery on which teachers and students are embarked *together*, driven not by a humanistic ideal of progressive improvement but by a passion to seek the truth of what is real and present in the world. Far from opening up a space for the cultivation of subjective self-expression, alongside and as a counterbalance to the space of objective knowledge transfer, this is to bring students

into an ongoing dialogue with the world itself, affording the possibility to attend to the things or beings to be found there, to answer to their presence, and to explore the conditions of coexistence with them. Instead of educating students in the subjects of art, here it is the practices of art that educate. They do so by opening a path, or showing a way, guiding attention towards aspects of the world that might be worthy of closer scrutiny.

### **Towards the undercommons**

This is to foster an attitude of what I shall call *response-ability*, by which I mean a capacity and a readiness to go along with things and answer to them. It is not a new idea. To the best of my knowledge, it was first introduced in 1957, in a lecture delivered by the composer John Cage (Cage 2011: 10). Only in the presence of things, Cage said, can we feel them, and only through feeling can we respond. Apparently unaware of this precedent, the cultural theorist Donna Haraway has recently reinvented the term in much the same sense. Response-ability, she says, is a 'praxis of care and response' (Haraway 2016: 105). Yet Cage's was not the only precedent, for just a decade before Haraway latched onto the term, it was also used by the educational philosopher Gert Biesta (2006: 70). For Biesta, response-ability refers to a certain *voice*. It is a voice of one's own that nevertheless only comes forth in soliciting others to respond, in theirs. Like a line in a conversation, or in polyphonic singing, every voice continually emerges in and through its joining with, and differentiating from, the voices of others. I call this *correspondence* – going along together and answering to one another as you go (Ingold 2017). And the question is: what if we were to imagine education in these terms, as a practice of correspondence rather than an engine of progress? What if we put the development of response-ability ahead of the cultivation of reason?

The voice of reason, of course, belongs to no-one. It transcends all variations of experience. And it is this voice, both authoritative and impersonal, that academic education aims to inculcate in students, specifically by dissociating knowledge from personal experience and by making it accessible to all. In the community of reason, as the philosopher Alphonso Lingis (1994: 165) has put it, everyone is interchangeable. Problems have their right answers, which are the same, whoever happens to come up with them. A mathematical theorem, for example, gives no hint of the life and times of the mathematician; a law of nature, or even of society, speaks nothing of those, whether scientists or jurists, who legislate on its behalf. A pedagogy of response-ability, however, would reverse the priorities of the academic model, placing attention to ever-emergent difference ahead of standardised measures of attainment. If, in the community of reason, it doesn't matter who you are, in the community of response-ability, it matters more than anything. For it is precisely because every voice in the community is different that its people are bound together. It is a community, as Lingis says, 'of those who have nothing in common' (Lingis 1994). Because they have nothing in common, each has something to give, something to contribute, to the ongoing conversation.

Indeed the very word community – from the Latin *com* ('with') plus *munus* ('gift') – implies not just 'living together' but 'giving together' (Esposito 2012: 49). Living together depends on *understanding*. It means finding support in a shared foundation, a solid base upon which all

can build. But giving together, to an extent, pulls the rug from under our feet. With no guaranteed base for our association, we have to hold on to one another, lest we are swept away by the current, in a correspondence that is not so much consequential as existential. I call this *undercommoning* (after Harney and Moten 2013). As such, undercommoning is just the opposite of understanding, not a reversion to what we all have in common to begin with but *a way of living together in difference*, in a world where nothing is certain (Ingold 2018: 38). What if education, then, were regarded as a practice of undercommoning? Literally, 'to educate' means to 'lead out' (from *ex*, 'out' plus *ducere*, 'to lead'). Education leads us out into the world, so that we can respond to it. And as a way of leading out, it is fundamentally a way of exposure. Far from finding safety and security in any established position or standpoint, it continually pulls us out of it, venturing with every step into the unknown (Masschelein 2010).

The purpose of education, then, would not be to arm ourselves with knowledge, or to shore up our defences so we can better cope with adversity. It would rather be to disarm, to expose, and by the same token to sharpen attention to the world around us, so that we can respond with skill and sensitivity to what is going on there. In this, teachers and students go along in each other's company, fellow travellers in the undercommons. The journey can be difficult, hazardous, even uncomfortable, with no guaranteed outcome. The job of the teacher is certainly not to make things easy for students. It is however to set an example. to serve as a generous guide, a constant companion, and a tireless critic. And students, following their teacher's example, should not be afraid to copy, just as the apprentice will copy in learning a craft. This is not plagiarism, it is practice. As an apprentice, the student practices under the eyes of the teacher only, eventually, to become those eyes, watching in turn over the next generation. Therein lies the continuity of tradition, founded on the assurance that students, who cannot be *compelled* to learn, are nevertheless eager to join in the endeavours of their teachers, and to relay the torch of learning for generations to come.

### **The passage of generations**

To think of education in this way, as a process of leading life in the company of others, of corresponding with them in the undercommons, of coming together in difference, is to align it not with progress but with sustainability. By 'sustainability', I don't mean the achievement of a precarious state of balance, such that what we take from the world, for our own present consumption, should not exceed its capacity for future regeneration. Insofar as this balancing act continues to treat the earth as a standing reserve for the benefit of a globally distributed humanity, it is still framed by the progressive ideal of the human subjugation of nature. I refer rather to the continuity of life, in a world that has room for us and for everyone and everything else, both now and forever. Real sustainability cannot be for some and not others. It must be for everything, for all time. But this means thinking differently of generations and their passage. Progress theorists tend to imagine every generation as a layer, each one adding to the one before, and building up a history in their succession. For them, history stacks up. And education is the process by which each generation is prepared for the new world that lies in

wait for it. But where progress builds up and up, sustainability carries on and on. What does this mean for generational replacement?

To answer this question, I find it helpful to compare life to a rope, and to think of generations as the fibres from which it is wound (Ingold 2024). No fibre lasts forever, yet since new fibres are paid in as old ones give out, the rope can keep on winding indefinitely. And it is the friction of their contact, as they overlap and twist around one another, that prevents the rope from unravelling. So it is, too, with the life of many lives. Here, generations are not stacked vertically but arrayed longitudinally, with new lives being introduced as fast as old ones pass away. Just as with the rope, the overlap of generations sustains the life process, while their rubbing along together keeps it from coming undone. Following the philosophy of Henri Bergson, we could see each generation, far from keeping to its own stratum, '*leaning over* the generation that shall follow' (Bergson 1922: 135). This leaning over, this overlap, is a gesture of care, even of love. We see it in the activities of walking side-by-side, of carrying and being carried, of holding hands. These, along with countless other gestures of everyday undercommoning, amount to the 'praxis of care and response' that, in Haraway's (2016: 105) terms, is the very essence of response-ability.

Every human being, of course, is born into a world. This is the elementary fact of natality. It means that for those who have already been around for a while, and are familiar with the ways of this world, their first task is to *introduce* these new beings into it. This, for political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1961), is the task of education. It is a relation between adults and children, in which the former shoulder the responsibility for the latter's development. And throughout most of human history, as Arendt observes (1961: 181), this relation has arisen normally and naturally 'from the fact that people of all ages are always simultaneously together in this world'. Thanks to intergenerational coexistence, youngsters have grown up learning the stories and observing the practices of their elders, both discovering the meanings of the stories and developing skills of practice in the passage of their own experience, and becoming storytellers and practitioners in their turn. In this lies the proper meaning of *tradition* – not a fixed body of heritable custom, to be passed on from one generation to the next, but a way of life along which it is possible to move on, in continuity with the values of the past, while laying down a path for others to follow. And it is by lovingly leaning over along their old ways that elders create the conditions for the young to strike out along a path of renewal.

### **Sustainability against progress**

How come, then, that in our present day and age, generations have been so prized apart that they no longer overlap but are stacked up? How can we account for this shift from the longitudinal to the vertical? The reasons are complex, and have much to do with capitalism's erosion of domestic modes of production, and with the redeployment of educational functions from the family to the state. For Arendt, writing in 1954, it was the failure of the state to take on the responsibility vested in it, by way of this redeployment, that underlies what she saw as the 'crisis in education' today. Instead of introducing young people into an

old world, the state insists on preparing them for a new one, the structure and values of which are already decided. Such preparation, Arendt thinks, offers but a pretence of education, the real purpose of which is not to introduce the young but to indoctrinate them. Its coercive effect is to deny them any chance at making the world anew, since by the time they arrive its future is already set. An education that fails in its responsibility to introduce young people into old ways – that to the contrary, *demand*s their conformity to a new order while controlling the conditions of their admission to it – can only lead to ruination. Ultimately, the fate of education boils down to the question, in Arendt's words again, of 'whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it' (Arendt 1961: 196). For only then can there be hope of renewal for generations to come.

For the past three centuries we have managed to persuade ourselves that progress is unstoppable, and that education, as it rejects the old for its own vision of the new, stacking every generation over the next, can carry human civilization to ever greater heights. Yet progress carries its price, in terms both of environments permanently ravaged by the extraction of the resources to sustain it, and of the ever-growing inequalities and injustices between those who have been the beneficiaries of progress and those who have lost out. As we know only too well, this price is now so high that any further extension of the ladder of progress is manifestly unsustainable. In short, progress and sustainability, like reason and response-ability, pull in different directions: one up, the other along. We cannot have both. And while we can agree that education is the way a society secures its own future, we have also to admit that if we are to have a future at all, it must rest on the principle of sustainability rather than progress. This means that education, too, has to shift its priorities from reason to response-ability. We should accordingly think of education as a way in which generations, even as they overlap, can contribute to each other's formation.

Yet the academic mainstream continues to insist that education is a kind of escalator that lifts up those who succeed to higher levels, while leaving the unsuccessful to sink to the bottom. As politicians and policymakers never tire of telling us, the avowed purpose of education is to set up those who undertake it at an advantage, or to raise them up the staircase of attainment, in a meritocracy that puts the highly educated at the top, with the most powerful positions, the highest incomes and the most enviable lifestyles. In this sense, education is supposed to be a way of overcoming disadvantage and promoting social mobility. Yet words such as 'disadvantage' and 'mobility' conjure up a competitive society in which some inevitably fare better, and others worse. When the same words are used to frame policies of education, they cannot help but reproduce the very hierarchies that institutions like schools and universities are pledged to overcome. Upward mobility allows some to rise to the top, but it does nothing to flatten the landscape. There will be winners and losers. This is not to serve the common good. It is to reserve it for some at the expense of others. One recent occasion, in particular, really brought this home to me.

## Democracy and education

Some years ago, in late October 2017, I found myself in the audience at an annual event held in the Barbican Centre, London, called *The Battle of Ideas*. I was in a packed session, devoted to the question, 'What is democracy?' A year had passed since the Brexit referendum, and feelings were still running high. The referendum had put the workings of democracy into the spotlight as never before. For remainers like myself, it seemed that the result had obliterated what was left of representative democracy – of the idea that people should trust their elected representatives to make informed decisions on their behalf. But for leavers, the referendum had at last restored power to the people, reclaiming democracy from the grip of a self-serving political elite interested only in preserving its exalted position of wealth and power while treating everyone else with an indifference bordering on contempt. As the debate proceeded, it became clear that one of the things that most rankled with those who claimed to speak for the people was the pretence of remainers to be more *educated* than they were, and therefore in a better position to reach a balanced, rational and objective judgement, on matters deemed too complex for ordinary folk to understand. Far from being seen as a social good, allowing all to live richer and more fulfilling lives, education came under attack, perceived as the means by which a select few could corner all the benefits of affluence for themselves.

Sitting in the audience, I was appalled by this attack on education, and by what seemed to me to be a crude misinterpretation of its spirit and purpose. So I rose to speak. I declared that education, far from being the enemy of democratic governance, is an essential prerequisite for any democracy to function at all. For even though legislative and decision-making powers are vested in elected representatives, ultimate responsibility for the exercise of these powers in the public interest lies with citizens. Yet only through education can citizens be properly prepared to exercise this responsibility. Far from attacking education, I said, we should do all we can to support it, above all by ensuring that the good it delivers is common to all. Judging from the response, I think many in the audience agreed. But others were not convinced. And as I reflected afterwards on this incident, it seemed to me that the critics of education had a point. For there's no doubt that the direction of educational policy, especially over the past quarter century, has been overwhelmingly oriented towards the meritocratic ideal of selecting the high-flyers of the future and preparing them for an employment market that, with rampant automation, is increasingly casting everyone else aside as surplus to requirements, destined to pick up odd jobs that afford only a precarious existence. Reacting to the demands of the global economy, education has helped drive inequality to obscene levels. No wonder it is held in contempt by those left behind in the race to the top!

Yet if the spirit and purpose of education have been hijacked by meritocracy, so, on the other side, have the spirit and purpose of democracy been corrupted by their reduction to 'the will of the people'. The result is a rift between education and democracy that is currently tearing our societies apart. An essential part of the healing process, I believe, must be to bring democracy and education together again. This was also on the mind of the philosopher John Dewey when, over a century ago, with war raging in Europe, he set down to write his greatest book, *Democracy and Education* (1966 [1916]). For Dewey, education is not about preparing individuals for employment or propelling them up the social ladder. It is, first and foremost,

about *securing the continuity of life*. And this is done not by feeding knowledge and information directly into the heads of learners, so as to bring them up to speed, but by bringing teachers and learners, respectively of older and younger generations, together in the co-creation of knowledge. Crucially, an education that entwines the wisdom and experience of the elderly with the wide-eyed curiosity of youngsters is transformative for *both* parties. In a process of leading out, educating and being educated are one and the same.

### Joining the conversation

You could perhaps compare it to a conversation. In the conversation, all participate, yet none can dictate what the outcome will be, nor, indeed, can any outcome be final, since the important thing is that the process can continue, that there are always loose ends to follow up. What happens in conversation is that participants are challenged to cast their experience forward, in their imaginations, to a place where they can find something in common with others who do the same, so as to achieve a degree of what Dewey (1966: 4) called 'like-mindedness' that enables them to carry on, to keep the conversation going. Though Dewey uses the word 'communication' for this, I feel the term is no longer apt, since in the century intervening between his time and ours, it has acquired new meanings related to information technology that limit communication to the effective transmission of message content. Communication, today, is about passing the specifications of your current position to others at a distance, rather than reaching out, in the company of others, towards positions that have yet to be found (Ingold 2018: 4). For this reason, as I have already suggested, I prefer the term 'undercommoning'. To recapitulate, the key to undercommoning lies not in the reversion to a baseline of what all have in common from the start, but in moving to a place where none has been before, a *new* place, but one that nevertheless affords a way ahead. It is about learning to live together in difference.

But could this not also be the true calling of democracy? Is it not also an ongoing conversation in which all are involved? Certainly not, as matters presently stand, or as democracy was understood by most of the participants in that debate in *The Battle of Ideas*. At its crudest – and certainly in the understanding of those who saw education, and the educated, as enemies of the people – democracy means a form of authoritarian governance in which the common interests of the numerical majority are imposed on everyone else. This is the very opposite of living together in difference. On the contrary, it divides people into opposing sides, united from the start in the defence of what they see as their shared interests. People are drawn together, here, by identity, and divided along lines of difference. Each side, reverting to base, can only dig deeper into established positions, leaving no possibility to move forward. From this impasse, education offers a possible escape route, but not a cure.

So what's the alternative? It is to think of democracy, like we think of education, as a conversation, a correspondence. In a democratic correspondence, as in the community of giving together, each participant has something to contribute precisely because all are different. Democracy, then, is a collective achievement which is potentially transformative for all involved. It leads us to another place. Might we thus dream of a future in which the



practices of democracy and education become one and the same, as experiences of exposure that lead us out into the presence of others, so that we can better respond to them? In response-ability, or correspondence, democracy and education converge in their alignment to the principle of the continuity of life, to ensuring that the rope of overlapping generations keeps on winding. This, in a word, is to commit not to progress but to sustainability. And it brings us back, at length, to the arts, and to their potential role in democratic transformation.

### **Arts and the curriculum**

I believe the arts are uniquely placed to bring about this convergence, and to heal the rift between democracy and education. On the side of democracy, the arts have the potential to open up spaces of conversation and correspondence based – unlike our current institutions of democratic politics – on principles of conviviality and difference rather than identity and division. Perhaps we could regard even the school as a collective work of art, installed at the heart of its community, justly celebrated for the illustrious new people that, over generations, it has introduced into the social world. Could we speak, then, not of an education in the arts, but of the arts of education? It would mean, on the side of education, treating the arts not as subjects to be taught, as ‘non-academic’ supplements to a curriculum centred on the academic model, but as *ways of teaching in themselves* (Ingold 2022: 15). What they offer is nothing less than an alternative model of education, founded in experience, in which the distinction between academic and non-academic subjects fades into irrelevance.

Take mathematics, for example, often considered the most logical and intellectual subject of all, poised at the pinnacle of human reason. In the academic model, mathematics is the gold standard to which every other subject aspires. Yet any practising mathematician will tell you that their way of study is fundamentally a craft of the intellect. At the end of the day, as biochemist and theoretician of chaos Otto Rössler once remarked, ‘mathematics is no more than pottery’ (cited in de Freitas 2016: 188). But he might just as well have said that pottery is no less than mathematics, or indeed that art or craft, as a practice of undercommoning, is the equal of any philosophy. It is not then that some subjects are so theoretical, so enveloped in propositional language, that they can be learned only through formal instruction, and others so practical, so resistant to logical or verbal expression, that they can be learned only by doing. It is of course this idea that lies behind the oft-cited distinctions between explicit and tacit knowledge, and between verbalisation and embodiment. These distinctions, which effectively deny practitioners any voice of their own, thereby creating a niche for the scholar-critic to speak on their behalf, are indeed the last bastion of academic snobbery.

For the fact is that practising artists – with whom I include craftspeople, musicians, dancers, architects, designers, and a host of others – are thinkers, just as so-called ‘academic’ scholars are, and can be as eloquent in the performance of their disciplines as anyone else. Conversely, academic scholarship would dry up were it not animated by bodily experience with vital materials. It is surely by restoring art to education, and education to art, instead of opposing them along a line of demarcation between academic and non-academic subjects, or between reason and empathy, or even between the left brain and the right, that we can finally arrive



at a *curriculum vitae* in its strict sense, not as a record of grades awarded in a ladder of attainment, but as the course of a life (Ingold 2022: 6). Put all these curricula together, and what do you get? Not a roadmap to modernity, marked out with milestones of attainment, but rather a rope of many strands that winds itself for as long as life goes on, never further from an origin or closer to an end, but always feeling a way into a beyond in the continual generation of the absolutely new. And therein, to conclude, lies the true meaning of sustainability.

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