

Going to the Heart of the Matter

Sharon Todd

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Abstract Written as a conversational response to Rosa Luxemburg, this piece discusses the importance of going to the heart of the matter for education, seen here in terms of the actual flesh and blood subjects who are at the centre of a pedagogy of transformation.

Keywords Rosa Luxemburg · Hannah Arendt · Luce Irigaray · Subjectivity · Aporia · Transformation · Becoming · Sexual difference

Do you know what gives me no peace nowadays? I am dissatisfied with the form and manner in which people in the Party for the most part write their articles. It's all so conventional, so wooden, so stereotyped.... I believe that the source of this lies in the fact that people when they're writing forget for the most part to go deeper inside themselves and experience the full import and truth of what they're writing. I believe that people need to live in the subject matter fully, and really experience it, every time, everyday, with every article they write, and then words will be found that are fresh, that come from the heart and go to the heart instead of [just repeating] the old familiar phrases.

Rosa Luxemburg, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*

In her ever-restless spirit Rosa Luxemburg goes to the heart of what is needed if life is allowed to enter our theoretical prose and if our words are to capture something of the freshness of life. Her words speak at once beyond the commonplace, beyond conventional rhetoric and didacticism, beyond the prosaic formulas upon which writers come to lean. Coming from and going to the heart is not just about style, but a bodily engagement with text itself, a way of making life manifest, resonant with passion and commitment. In being offered this opportunity to write my own thoughts on education without the usual constraints of academic form means having to consider alternative modes of writing that, of course, bring their own constraints. But whatever the limitations might be—and the reader will no doubt be quick to identify them!—they are the necessary risks of intertwining

S. Todd (✉)
Department of Education, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden
e-mail: sharon.todd@edu.su.se

writing with living, of writing not simply *as though* life mattered, but writing *because* it does.

What strikes me about the quote from Rosa—forgive the familiarity, for that is how I have addressed her for the past 30 years in my own imagined conversations with this formidable woman—is that it is every bit as much about education as about writing. For what she is calling for is not simply the overcoming of our stale or clichéd phrasing, which can position our texts as being way past the due date of the contemporary, ‘real’ circumstances we frequently write about, but an attention to the felt and experienced aspects of life as being important for thought. What concerns me here then is that writing my thoughts *on* education is really about writing my thoughts *in* education and finding a ‘proper’ mode of saying that captures how I interact in the world. This mode can only be for me one of response. A response to an address, to a text, to a person. An attempt to think through education as a response to another’s call to respond.

I know what you mean, Rosa. Dissatisfaction with words, with their failure to live up in some ways to the demands of the world. What you have always taught me, although I have some questions regarding what you have sacrificed, is that passion is never far from the surface of political life. You longed to retire to Switzerland amidst the mountains and meadows with Leo, your comrade in arms, revealing the doubleness (perhaps the multiplicity?) of what is at stake in thinking life alongside your desire. How one writes about justice and how one lives it is no simple task, and sometimes they pull in opposite directions. For instance, what has always interested me theoretically about justice in education has always been inseparable from my own educational experiences. How they use to deny the importance of my class and my being a girl, Rosa! Yet, even though my schooling has left its particular imprimatur on my life, there is no seamlessness between what I write and how I live or teach—a seamlessness captured in such well-worn phrases as ‘walking the talk,’ ‘practicing what you preach’. These are the clichés I know you so despise—quite rightfully so. They seem to assume that there is no messiness or complexity in becoming transformed by ideas, or in acting in sync with our thoughts. As Hannah would say, there is no direct connection between our thinking and our actions, and although she would not have been revolutionary enough for you, Rosa, she nonetheless could appreciate the felt dilemmas of living a life politically engaged and passionately committed. But more than this, it is precisely this disorder that so characterizes our attachments—ethical, political, emotional—which is the very stuff of what transforms us, and what compels us to become someone different than before. But what a pedagogy of transformation means is not nearly so clear-cut for me as it possibly is for you.

Indeed, this is one of the tensions, I think, between us. Let’s face it, it is not just party hacks but a long tradition of enlightenment ones—going back to the Greeks—that see education as an *instrument* for change, as something one needs in order to become someone other, someone altered: in your phrasing someone useful, someone who can carry on the fight. Why is this so? What makes you think that education ought to be put in the service of your political ends? Don’t we simply end up in a theory of education as imposition, not unlike the most conservative theories of upbringing? Don’t get me wrong, I know how unavoidable all this is. I stand up in the class, with my own (often implicit) desires, wanting the students to get something from the course, to change and alter not only *what* they think, but also *how* they think, introducing them to new possibilities that provoke their curiosity and, hopefully, new insights. At the same time, I try—really try—not to impose my ideas. I put on different hats, try on different guises in order to disrupt their

thought, their conventional modes of address. “But,” you will say, “is this ‘side-stepping’ really all that different from business as usual? Do you really think you can avoid your own influence, your own imposition?” Well, I suppose that is the point. I feel caught in what I see as the inherent ambivalence of education: we want to educate for change but we want to do so by ensuring what students become. As my good colleague Lars says in relation to Kant, the paradox of education lies in its treatment of freedom. Wanting desperately for students to become free while also wanting to form and mould them. What kind of freedom is this? So, I’ve always wondered, Rosa, how and if we can keep a sharp political eye on changing things while admitting of this paradox. How can we learn to live better in this *aporia* of education? I’m afraid I’ve become a bit obsessed by this question.

But what is this talk of a *poros*—without passage? Isn’t the desire to change things about finding a passage, a road, a path that can help us navigate through the hazards of life? Shouldn’t education at a fundamental level be about ‘passage’? About finding one’s way? About pointing students in the right direction? It is the certainty, Rosa, embedded in the idea of ‘passage’ that I am most weary of. There is a sense in which your dissatisfaction for wooden phrases resonates with my own dissatisfaction with wooden certainties that are so rife in education. How many times have people found *the* aim or *the* purpose of education as *the* answer to a wide variety of problems: poverty, illiteracy, sexism, racism—take your pick. Obviously, these ills ought not to exist and education needs to find a way of responding to them politically—and ethically. But to treat education as a political instrument can be risky because it can produce a non-thinking attitude to questions that demand our thoughtful, urgent attention. Seeing the passage too clearly *for* others robs them of their sense of sight and doesn’t teach them to trust their senses, to feel their own way along, to reflect on their implication in the world. Imposing a passage can simply be a way of inviting resistance, which in turn deepens, not unexpectedly perhaps, one’s own entrenchment in one’s position. To get us out of our ensconced positions, we need to find the appropriate response to these issues in ways that do not instrumentalize education, and do not cement our certainties, but that turn education itself into a response—a response oriented toward the actual persons we encounter and the collective struggles they face. Perhaps you know this already, Rosa. You know the damage that can be done when we channel our energies into developing ‘isms’ (and education is full of them, let me tell you), at the expense of listening to others, at the expense of thinking itself. You either follow the passage defined by others or you are out. You know how this game works. You were murdered for it. Have we learnt nothing?

But this is sounding like a bit of a lament. And I certainly haven’t spent most of my life in classrooms and other places to do with education because I think them useless, ethically bereft or politically meaningless. Being critical of ‘isms’, of the piety that surrounds our political aims of education, does not mean being derisive of education itself or of the ways in which it can make a difference in people’s lives. But I do think, Rosa, we cannot be naïve about the *aporia* and felt dilemmas of schooling, even as I think education is fundamentally about change and transformation. But my question is: what transformational role can education play in order to make a difference in the world if it already presumes to know what it wants that world to be and what it wants students to become? Isn’t this simply a function of arrogance? An arrogance that claims in the name of others how they ought to live and what they ought to value? How might we instead introduce humility into education in such a way as it can open itself up toward an indefinite future at the same time as it takes a stance toward past and present injustices? My own take is that unless we learn to live better in the *aporia*, we diminish education’s potential and actually reproduce the very forms of imposition we seek to challenge, despite our best intentions. This means being

cautious, hesitant and mindful of our tendencies to define for others what ‘we’ think ‘they’ need. Education and politics are not synonymous, and each sphere brings with it its own responsibilities and dilemmas. There is definitely a place for politically informed pedagogical practices, but only without the vanguardism, without the knowing beforehand the kind of world that will—indeed must—belong to a new generation. It is they, not us, who have the right to define what their world will be; how it will be governed, organized, thought about, experienced. But as Hannah pointed out so eloquently, if we lose sight of the dilemma of education, caught as it is between past tradition and an indefinite future, then we have no way of thinking in the present. Thinking *along with* a new generation, being moved by their concerns and introducing them into ours. A present of humility borne in a relationship of listening, reflecting, and judging. There is no room here for vanguardism, no place to tell others that they must be what we tell them to be; instead there is a space that recognizes how I am bound to and separated from others in a complicated drama of which I do not know the final act.

This, I think, is the ‘truth’ of the matter—the ‘heart’ of the matter. You once quoted Lessing, a man whose sensibility also captured Hannah’s imagination for his insight into the relation with truth: “One who thinks of conveying to mankind truths masked and rouged, may be truth’s pimp, but has never been truth’s lover.” So if we may be permitted to speak of a truth here as a lover, it has to be a truth without certainty, a truth that holds surprise, a truth that cannot be prostituted for profit. For a lover simply could not do otherwise to her beloved. She cannot tell her loved one how to change so she may love her better. And such a ‘truth’ is about the uncertain event of education, the pedagogical event of transformation that is occasioned not by government decree, or political will, or moral imperative, but by what I see as a sometimes mysterious, almost alchemical, process involving persons, places, and times. So going to the heart of the matter for me, Rosa, is about going neither to socio-political structures nor to psychology, but to encounter and context.

It has to do with that lived experience you talked about—the one that ought to inform our writing. Encounters are not simply about two people meeting, but about a calling forth of our very existence in response to another, to others. Encounters with others are an indelible part of both making and living a life. The *aporia* of education resides, then, not only in the question of freedom and defining for others what their future ought to be, but also in the relational ties that constitute my being present with and for others. Thus I am also torn to some degree between *what* I am—a teacher—and *who* I am, which can only unfold in an encounter with another. For this reason, I do not see that who we become, as Hannah puts it, is reducible to what we are (including our class, our gender), neither is it a purely individual, psychological process. Instead, these encounters are eminently ‘social’, dynamic, and unpredictable. They are what make each of us unique and singular, like no other. So when you and I talk politics, Rosa, I am thinking of the ways that we articulate ourselves into being, through speech and action, through language and the body, through narrative and drama as eminently political articulations in encounters with others. The question then is how to accommodate such encounters into our educational schemes? How to make room for the embodied ‘who’ to come forth in order to disrupt the hegemonic assumption that education has always to be about developing a ‘what’?

In some ways this is a profoundly feminist question, since it seeks to refuse already defined identities, which as we women know have historically left us short-changed (at the very least). This leaving open of the question of ‘what’ I am speaks directly to how social identities rarely capture any sense of ‘who’ I am. And as Luce says, because we live not only with capitalist greed but with patriarchy’s desire, who ‘I’ am raises different stakes for

both women and men. For the question of subjectivity is not just a 'women's' question, but one that affects both sexes. It is based on the matrix of embodiment, language, and our relations to each other. So rather than speaking of replacing one identity with another, the point is to create an appreciation of subjectivity that is not yet defined, not yet filled with content or substance. This means that women's and men's subjectivities—and not their identities—are always becoming, are not-yet. This seems to me crucial, Rosa, in coming to understand that what lies at the heart of the matter are not simply different forms of identity, like shapes cut out of cardboard, but flesh and blood women and men embodying their emerging subjectivities. Allowing ourselves to think about the heart in this way means having a respect for the other's becoming. Educationally speaking, it means attending to pedagogical space in a way that treats education neither as a means to an end, nor as an end in itself, but as an unpredictable site, where we cannot know with any certainty what the future holds and which subjects will unfold in its midst—subjects both unique and different, in relation.

If each is not unique, then there is no plurality, there are no women or men, only abstractions: woman, man. In this I agree with Hannah, plurality is simply the human condition that we must face. If we see that each of us becomes someone as an instance of singularity, do we not have more of a chance to rearticulate a politics that respects the difference upon which our very existence rests? And if we see this process as pedagogical, then do we not have a sense of education that truly responds politically to current issues, as opposed to being an instrument of a politics always already defined elsewhere and by someone else?

As you know, Rosa, I'm not just speaking here of politics, but of an ethics that is part of the scene of transformation, the scene of pedagogy, the scene of becoming. I sometimes don't know where one ends and the other begins, but I do know that they speak to different aspects of our existence: our obligations to others, in the plural, and our responsibility for the other, in the singular. It is these two aspects that cannot easily be married. I somehow feel, though, that in your call for a political language that embodies the freshness of life, it is this level of specificity we find in the singular that can give us a grammar (if not a vocabulary) for animating our political concerns. This, I want to say, is also true for education. So long as we think abstractions can serve as substitutes for actual women and men, girls and boys, and that imperatives can stand in proxy for the future, then education will never be responsive to who they are here and now. That is, if we keep insisting on defining what they ought to be, according to our plans for their future, then we can never notice who each one is becoming, in context with others. It is not about having knowledge about our students that matters, but listening to them, attending to their presence revealed through the words they speak. The very power of the ethical, as I see it, comes from what you have called the 'heart'—the place of passion, warmth, affection, tenderness. Responsibility is born here, fragile and delicate at the same time as it is exacting and demanding. A burden, Levinas calls it, one that finds me wherever I go, one that speaks through me, whether I choose it or not. Isn't this the place of unique election that compels me to speak out against the injustices done to my neighbour? Isn't this a responsibility that can help us live better within the *aporia* of education, with attentiveness and awareness, with thoughtfulness and responsiveness? To me, it stands as a reminder of the price that is to be paid when we turn education into a faceless enterprise, into an 'ism', into a factory for identity production. We lose the idea that education concerns actual persons, women and men, who are always becoming present in context.

It is getting to be night and it sometimes feels to me as though I am warring with forces far greater than I can shed light upon. Quality, managerialism, performativity,

accountability, excellence, impact factors, standardization, learning outcomes. The list is endless and it makes me tired, makes we wonder what a strange Vonnegutian system education has become. But so long as, I suppose, we can teach and write and learn with words that breathe, then the heart of education has perhaps not evaporated, but hangs fragrant and dewy waiting for new day, a new generation. Perhaps this is my Switzerland, Rosa.

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