
Rezension / Book review

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Jennifer Gidley :

Postformal Education – a philosophy for complex futures.
Springer International Publishing, Switzerland, 2016

“Unless we resolve to rehumanise education so its core purpose becomes once again to develop whole human beings who care, who ... respect life, who exercise wisdom and who have the courage to voice their truths to those who would corrupt our futures, then we should forget about the whole idea of education altogether.”

So says Jennifer Gidley in the summary epilogue to this remarkable book. This quotation, quite apart from its passionate advocacy of educational reform, gives ample expression to the breadth of the author’s frame of reference. Here is someone who is aware of the noble heritage of education and is equally full of enthusiasm for the tremendous future potential it harbours. We can also hear that this is a radical voice.

The book delivers on all these counts. Anyone who opens it will be entering a multi-perspectival mindscape, a sweeping panorama of the post-formal in all its guises. This could quickly become an academic labyrinth, were it not for the guiding intelligence of the author. Rarely have I come across a book with such a copious scope of reference. The range of material that Jennifer Gidley has marshalled and organised into this book is positively breathtaking, sometimes totally overwhelming. There are sections where she plies the reader with reference after reference, perspective on perspective, until the mind (or, at any rate, this mind) reels with alternatives. But she also has an extraordinary facility for pulling all these threads together and setting them in an ordered context.

This contrast between such far-reaching breadth of multi-perspectival detail and the need to know what it means in practical terms and where it is going sets up a tension that persists all the way through. This is the tension between map and territory. Now, we all know that “the map is not the territory”, and so – with her years of hands-on experience – does Jennifer Gidley, but her urgent awareness of all the avenues that are currently opening up in education has led her to devote quite a bit of this book to a mapping exercise. Considering the multi-dimensional implications of post-formal thinking, this decision on her part is fully justified. In doing so she manages to clarify the main features of post-formal consciousness, and makes it abundantly clear just how future-oriented they are. She also shows how they are characteristic of certain modern thinkers who have not hitherto enjoyed much attention, let alone high regard, in the context of traditional formal academic thinking. There are three of these in particular whom she places at the philosophical heart of all her deliberations. They are Rudolf Steiner, Jean Gebser and Ken Wilber. I will return to this point later.

As it proceeds, the book alternates between pure mapping and entering various theoretical and practical territories. Mapping pre-dominates in the early chapters, gradually giving way to more and more “territory”, and this is an exhilarating process, even if occasionally one expects to be entering a concrete territory and finds oneself still in a map. But I don’t wish to press this analogy too far.

If you are looking for a book which gives as thorough a survey of the global educational landscape as could be wished for, you need look no further. Jennifer Gidley can point you in whatever direction you wish to go, but she also takes you on her own direction. It is actually impossible for a review to do justice to the way she does this. The scope of her research is awe-inspiring, and she has a highly developed ability to perceive trends and relationships where others have remained in the dark. One such example is her discovery that there are parallels between the work of post-Piagetian developmental psychologists (i.e. those who have gone beyond Piaget's characterisation of "formal operations" into "post-formal operations") and that of researchers, theorists and practitioners of pedagogies which imply and prepare for the development of post-formal consciousness. Not only did she discover these parallels, but also uncovered the fact that these two fields of endeavour are largely unaware of each other. So in this book she has brought these two fields together, viewed them in the light of each other, and, in true Goethean style, an intensification ("Steigerung") has occurred, which has provided the main substance of her philosophy of education. If the book succeeds only in making these psychologists and educational theorists aware of their common ground, then it will have done its job, but, in keeping with this Goethean intensification, Ms. Gidley takes things a lot further.

Through a long, exceedingly complex but well-presented sequence of interactive mapping of the features of post-formal consciousness onto the evolutionary themes (an exposition of the part played by the evolution of consciousness in the development of ancient and modern education is another main thread of this book) emerging from multiple strains of developmental psychology she arrives at four main principles, which form the core of her post-formal philosophy of education.

Part III of the book (the mapping/surveying having been accomplished largely in the first two parts) is then devoted to an exposition of these four principles. Here the "territory" finally comes into its own, and the power they have as emblems of possible educational futures is considerably enhanced by the fact that they are not just "the author's ideas", but have emerged organically out of the vast educational, psychological and philosophical terrain considered in the earlier parts of the book. The four chapters in which this exposition is presented constitute a comprehensive picture of what modern, future-oriented, creative

and imaginatively experiential education could be like. Particularly striking is the fact that many of the features thus described have long been intrinsic to Waldorf education; for instance, the emphasis upon nurturing the "pedagogical voice".

This points to another of Jennifer Gidley's sterling accomplishments in this book – this returns us to the three thinkers mentioned earlier. She has succeeded here in considerably enhancing the claim of Waldorf education to be included as an integral part of modern educational discourse. She has also brought its founder firmly into the ambit of post-formal thinkers, showing his direct kinship with the work of Jean Gebser, Ken Wilber and many others. Although post-formalism, as she herself acknowledges, is still largely "ex-academy", at least this is a step in the right direction.

Trans-disciplinarity is a key element of post-formal consciousness, and obviously this is not without its problems. For instance, in speaking of the evolution of consciousness, as she does very extensively throughout the book, it is not always clear what this means. Are we talking about the evolutionary emergence of the faculty of cognition from non-cognitive antecedents, or are we talking about the gradual individualisation of universal Mind? I suspect that what Ken Wilber thinks about this would be very different from what it meant for Rudolf Steiner. But then, being able to hold and encompass the tension of contrasting worldviews is another leading aspect of post-formal thinking.

Given the vast scope of her sphere of reference and the fact that the evolution of consciousness and the post-formal principle of trans-disciplinarity are such important features of her whole epistemological framework, it is rather puzzling that one name, Owen Barfield, figures only very marginally in the book's deliberations, and another, Henri Bortoft, not at all. Both these authors could be said to have written manuals of post-formal thinking, and there are quite a number of places in the text where a reference to either or both of these authors would have greatly enriched the context. This is not meant as a criticism or a complaint, I merely wished to register my perplexity at their absence in contexts where they would seem to belong.

Now I must mention one small gripe. In negotiating the trans-disciplinary boundaries as Jennifer Gidley has so skilfully done in this book, there is a strong tendency to be drawn to creative neologisms – my

lap-top, for instance, does not accept “postformal” and “transdisciplinarity” as proper words – for you are continually entering realms where there are no readily available terms. Most of them, like the two examples I’ve just mentioned, work very well, but one or two cross the line from creativity into syntactic impossibility. One such is the use (following Gadamer) of the word “language” as a transitive verb. This is a bridge too far (Gadamer notwithstanding), and although it might seem like a pedantic quibble, I feel it is an ever-present danger to be aware of. It is really a momentary failure of critical and poetic sensibility caused, no doubt, by the constant tension of navigating the disciplinary borderlands. Having experienced such a usage one feels one might turn the page and find the author extolling the virtues of “edu-tainment”, in which case my next act would be to slam the book shut.

Thankfully, however, this is a momentary phenomenon, and the book is much more likely to be characterised by the brilliance of its formulations. Ms. Gidley writes very lucid prose, which rises at times to considerable heights of eloquence. She can

turn up the radical heat when she needs to, and characterise with lyrical evocation when the context requires it.

To sum up, if you are trying to work creatively in education and you want to know who your allies are in the fight against the “audit culture” of modern factory-style education, then you need to read this book. There seems to be no corner of modern alternative educational thinking that Jennifer Gidley has not delved into. Furthermore, she has organised all the various strains of modern philosophy, psychology and educational thinking into a large contextual framework, which gives direction, but – in true post-formal style – stops short of any definitive closure. Through all this also what sounds very strongly is her insight into and passionate respect for the integrity of the child. This book deserves to be read widely by teachers, educational academics and especially by policy-makers. Should educational policy change towards a more desirable direction, this book will no doubt have made its contribution.