

# Boundaries and beyond: Reconsidering the unknown as a formative element

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## Introduction

The way education deals with boundaries shapes the meaning we give to education itself. This can be ways to acknowledge or relate to boundaries, but also ways to overcome or erase them. Many aspects of human formation are related to the crossing of boundaries, which can be that of the self or that of the known, one of the oldest forms of which is the rite of adult becoming known as “rite of passage” in cultural anthropology (van Gennep, 1960). It is represented by the symbolic crossing of the threshold between childhood and adulthood (though rites of passage are not limited to rites of adult becoming). Growth here is considered as a passage from one to another distinct state of being. While crossing the threshold between the two states, the individual is neither of them. It is a chaotic, intermixed condition which is deemed to be defiled and impure, but which is also the seat of the sacred, what unites the experience of the individual with the order of the universe (Douglas, 1966; Caillois, 1959). The boundary is part of this order and its crossing a necessary experience to achieve growth through unity with it.

Nevertheless, the modern educational system abandoned rites to embrace another conception of education and human formation, through development stages, didactic teaching and empirical learning. But how does such conception of education deal with boundaries? The development process is known to have stages, but it is seldom referred to as having boundaries. It is not a crossing through different states, but rather something like a road or stair, on which one is standing from the start and up to which one is led. Educational endeavour aims at making sure that the child does not stray from the preordained itinerary, preventing any ‘deviance’, and thus ensuring the transmission and integration of knowledge and world views, cultural assets, behavioural and normative patterns necessary to become a full-fledged member of the community.

Here, a boundary is the locus of encounters with what lies beyond it, which we apprehend through experience. In so doing, we come to know about other human beings, the society we live in and the world that surrounds us. The resorption of boundaries is the goal of experience, without which there is no possibility of systematic knowledge or social interaction. But the existence of boundaries is also the very condition of experience, that which makes it happen. Experience is ambivalent.

Human formation through experience needs boundaries as much as it needs to overcome them. In this paper, two ways of crossing boundaries will be discussed. One is the way towards a goal (which can be knowledge or problem solving); the other is the way as a process of relation (with the unknown, the strange, uncertainty). The usual meaning we give to experience in contemporary education emphasizes mainly the former, but our argument is that the formative potential of the latter should be reconsidered.

## Experience as a method

The usual meaning of experience in education is that of acquiring knowledge through empirical learning. It is first and foremost the way we structure the natural world through scientific inquiry and its methodology. For example, the science experiments in schools are meant to learn about, say, the laws of physics. In such experiments, it is not the experience itself and its relation to the individual, but rather its outcome which is emphasized. The experiment is considered a ‘success’ if and only if it brings a ‘correct’ result. That is, the phenomenon or measurement that *should* occur to *all* students. Experience is not acknowledged as such unless it reaches a ‘proper end’, with whatever

other result being considered a failure (Murakami, 1986). Certainly, there are many 'educational experiences' which are not science experiments and it would be reductive to think of empirical learning under such a bias. For example, experiential education that flourished under the influence of 20<sup>th</sup> century pragmatism and progressive education grieved the distance between didactic teaching and the child's experience of life. It opened the way to get children out of the classroom, to relate to society and the environment and learn from it. But it has a common trait with educational science experiments which is predictability. To be 'educational' an experience has to be a programme. It has to remain under the control of the provider<sup>1</sup> to ensure that the experience reaches the end it was meant to.

However, empiricism and its later developments had great influence in the development of empirical research methods in modern sciences. Its contribution to the educational field or the validity of its method will not be questioned here. It is rather the limitations of its conception of experience (and the subsequent consequences in discussing the relation of human formation to boundaries) that are at stake and need to be assessed.

In this context, experience in education means a process of knowledge acquisition *about what is already known*. In contrast with didactic teaching, it is not knowledge as a cultural asset, knowledge transmitted from teacher to learner but it is something only waiting out there to happen and be observed, like the laws of nature. Experience is 'out there' before it actually occurs to the individual, and paradoxically, its outcome is pre-existent to its process itself.

As Takahashi (2007) explains, such a long tradition of a naturalistic understanding of experience in education has made it a method subordinated to the will of the occidental Self, notwithstanding otherness or the unknown as the boundary of the Self. In modern society, through the dualism of Man's free will against the laws of Nature, experience is understood as an endless movement of resorption of the unknown into the known. It lies on the foundations of the Self, the sovereign modern subject. Experience is the method to gain increasing control over the uncertainty of nature, through knowledge that can be shared and transmitted to the community. A fundamental requirement of empirical knowledge is reproducibility, along with the aforementioned predictability. Interpreting the renowned critic of reproducibility, Walter Benjamin, Takahashi observes that modern society "dislikes the uniqueness of events, so through reproduction, it strives to appropriate what would otherwise shade away in the ephemerality of the moment. [...] Modern technology does not acknowledge the contingency, the vulnerability, the pathos in human life. It makes everything a reproducible experience. [...] Human beings no longer live in a world woven from relations with events. They slip out of such situations and appropriate them, package them from outside [their context]. In this case, the experience-appropriating self will never be exposed to the risk of getting hurt, for it is loose of relation [with the eventfulness of experience]." (Takahashi, 2007, p.72, my translation)

From this standpoint, the boundary problem is nonexistent, it is a temporary incident borne to be resorbed into community. Otherness stands against the Self, but it is understood as a commensurable element for the intersubjective building of a common world (Takahashi, 2007). Certainly, an experience has to be appropriable, reproducible for it to be included in any educational system, as long as such a system itself is a reproduction system. But is experience only a method to reach a goal? Can it be affirmed with sufficient certainty that we master the happening of the experiences we reproduce? The answer is probably negative, because an experience is not only the process of deliberately causing something to happen in a definite learning context, it is also the process of something happening, that we do not necessarily wish for, let alone have the ability to master. We stand on the threshold of experience when something (the unnamed, the incommensurable, the unknown, the other) breaches the ordinariness of our daily life, when we stand on the boundary of the known and the unknown, of the self and otherness.

The existence of boundaries is that which makes experience happen whether we wish it or not. So, thinking of experience only in terms of the knowledge it helps acquire or the definite developmental tasks it helps solve is missing an important aspect of experience in human formation. In the tremendous number and variety of experiences an individual has or may have, there are experiences that do not 'reach a proper end' to be integrated into some meaningful whole or shared

with others<sup>2</sup>, let alone be put into words -- experiences that cannot be reproduced or appropriated, for they only happen once. In this case, the unknown, the strange, uncertainty does not simply vanish at the end of the experience, it leaves a trace in the one who undergoes it. French philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to experience as being a crossing, a journey through something (Derrida, 1994), not just the resorption of the unknown into the safety of the known.

### Experience as a crossing

Experience, for Derrida, is closely related to the limits of experience, the conditions in which experience is not possible, namely, aporetic situations. Through this account of experience, we can also get important insights on what is an experience, so far as it is possible.

According to Derrida, “experience is a crossing (*traversée*), something that goes through (*passer au travers*) and travels towards a destination for which it finds the passage. The experience finds its path, it is possible. And in this sense it is impossible to have a full experience of aporia, that is, of something that does not allow passage. An aporia is a non-path (*non-chemin*).” (Derrida, 1994, p. 37, my translation)

Here Derrida refers to experience as the possibility to find the passage, and opposes it to the situation of aporia. Discussion on aporia in a teaching/learning context can be traced back to Plato’s dialogue, the *Meno*<sup>3</sup>, but the implications of aporetic situations will not be discussed here. We will rather focus on the meaning of experience in relation with the possibility of crossing and finding a path. To begin with, experience as a ‘crossing’ can mean two different things, according to what is crossed, and this is precisely what is left to the reader’s interpretation in Derrida’s text. Experience is something that goes through, we are told, but go through what? To elucidate this point, we may think about what a crossing is.

What is a crossing? A crossing implies the existence of a boundary or limit, otherwise there is nothing to be crossed. It means that a crossing occurs either by going through the boundary separating two spaces or by going from one end to the other of a delimited space. But in both cases, a crossing implies the existence of an outside, a beyond. Even in the latter case, limits are separating the inside from the outside.

Obviously, the path going through the former is different from the path crossing the latter. In this sense, the experience as a crossing, as something finding its path cannot be referred to as a single unified concept. There is not *one* path, proper to experience to unfold, but at least two sorts of paths, because there are two ways of crossing. Burbules says that a passage can be many things, “a passage *to* is different from a passage *through*, which is different from a passage *from*. Sometimes a passage connects knowns; sometimes it leads from a known to an unknown.” (Burbules, 2000, p.175, italics in original)

Kofman (1983) distinguishes the Greek words *odos* (a path connecting knowns) and *poros* (a passage across the unknown), and strongly emphasizes that these two paths are not to be confused. In Burbules’ words, “Lacking an *odos* is not the same as lacking a *poros*. These two kinds of passage are important because they imply two kinds of transition out of doubt: one by progress toward a fixed answer, one by movement toward an unknown destination.” (Burbules, 2000, p.175)

*Odos* (alternatively spelled ‘*hodos*’ in Liddell & Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1996) is a road or way in general, or the course of a river. Used with expression of direction, it is a definite path towards a goal, a way *to* somewhere or something. But it also means a method, a system, in itself or by extension in the word ‘*methodos*’, etymological root for the English ‘method’ (Liddell & Scott, 1996 under ‘*hodos*’, ‘*methodos*’). It is an already existing path leading somewhere definite and known beforehand, similar to a road drawn on a map. There is a starting point, a destination point and it only indicates the way to follow in order to connect the two. Lacking an *odos* is when the goal is known but not the way to reach it. Once the path is traced, it becomes the method to find one’s way faster and more easily while minimizing uncertainty and risk, thus acquiring predictability and reproducibility. Being the connection between two knowns, it is the passage that results from the resorption of the unknown into the light of the known.

On the other hand, *poros* is related to the means of passing a river or crossing the sea. It is not a method, but a device for finding a path *through* an uncertain element (Liddell & Scott, 1996, under

'poros') .The sea is a perpetually moving and changing space. It means that a marine path is never traced in advance, that it has to be found and travelled anew every time (Kofman, 1983). Lacking a *poros* is having both the way out and the destination unknown, when one is marooned in unknown space. It is *aporos*, the non-path of aporia. *Poros* is a path opened where no path exists yet, and where no path can ever exist. For this reason, *poros* is never a definite path, it is not leading to a definite destination either, the destination being known only through the process of making the path.

Thus, experience as a crossing can be interpreted as a path towards a goal (*odos*) or as a path yet to be made across the unknown (*poros*). The educational implications of these two ways of considering experience will be discussed below.

### Experience, boundaries and human formation today

"We teach certainties, but -- this is a fundamental problem -- not the way to cope with uncertainty." (Morin, 2003, p.106, my translation)

Needless to say, human formation is not limited to education as conceived in the contemporary educational system. The scope of experience as accounted in this paper goes beyond the framework of (formal) education. The intricate network of relations of the individual to the environment has also an important though informal role as a formative element, and we must acknowledge its influence. Experience can be an unpredictable breach in the continuity of our lives. Sometimes, there are some experiences we helplessly wish for to happen, sometimes there are some others that we wish had never happened, but unlike the experience-appropriating self, we have little influence on the happening and outcome of our experiences. In Derrida's text, there is no reference to a grammatical subject other than 'the experience', no centrality of the self. Experience goes through the self as much as the self goes through experience, if there is still a self to be referred to. The experience finding its path, one close to Kofman's *poros*, is opposed to aporia, the lack of *poros*, and destination is only a secondary element of a process of relation to the event of experience<sup>4</sup>.

So, why is experience as a relation process important? Because it reveals an aspect of human formation often obscured by the methodical understanding of experience as an *odos*. On a road already existing, that one has only to follow, what stands outside is seldom taken into account. Building a road is a process requiring time, personnel and equipment, but once the road is open to traffic, the traces of this process are erased and what is not on the road becomes insignificant landscape. There is no finding, because there is no outside. More precisely, there will be no finding other than what has been previously meant to be found. Development does not take the unknown into account, it *minimizes* it. The road or stair of education understood as development is also an *odos*. It is the same for everyone, has an identical starting point, a similar destination and alike stages, which are the milestones marking the way leading to a 'normal' development. *Odos* emphasizes destination over the path itself, which is only a secure means to reach a goal, without having to go through the relation process and minimizing the risk of getting hurt. In modern society, Giddens observes areas of "sequestration of experience" which are "the condition of the establishing of large tracts of relative security in day-to-day life in conditions of modernity." (Giddens, 1991, p.167) For example, extrinsic nature (such as naturally occurring events) is becoming more and more pulled into systems determined by socialised influences<sup>5</sup>.

Of course, uncertainty and the risk of getting hurt is something anyone will wish to avoid, and society understandably strives to provide its members with a secure and ordered living environment. Contemporary education provides the individual with means of socialisation and development which are of fundamental importance for the formation of the individual as a social being. It provides what Giddens calls 'ontological security'. But, human formation cannot be limited to acquisition of the method for safely travelling on already existing roads. Human communities build a commensurable world to live in, a world of meaning and order shaped in the form of culture and maintained by educational endeavour. It is necessarily a world with boundaries, and much attention is paid to not crossing them. We have grown eager to shun conflict, risk, uncertainty out of the relative order of our daily life. We have striven to keep everything *inside*. But as long as we live in

a bounded world, there will always be an outside. However hard we strive, incommensurable elements (uncertainty, the unknown) will always remain beyond the boundary. And the point of utmost importance is that we are not isolated from these elements: they have influence on, and are connected with the flow of our lives. So when they show up, when the integrity of the boundary we strove so hard to maintain is breached, we are cast into the unknown. We may get hurt, we may get lost, we may encounter conflict but we may also find new paths and new destinations. For learning methods to avoid conflict (keeping up the quality of our social relations through wholesome interpersonal communication and the similar ways to commensurability, for example) does not show how to cope with conflict in itself.

As Morin (cited in the head of this section) justly observes, we never teach how to cope with uncertainty, but we direly need to learn from it. We need to learn resilience, though blazing the path to relation with what is beyond the boundary is a task no *odos* can undertake, for it is a path through the unknown. The process of relation to uncertainty that lies beyond the boundary is a path with no goal, a *poros*. It requires not to be followed but to be made, for it does not exist yet. Relation to the unknown is formative in a sense different from that of education as development. It does not foster progressive, integrative growth, but rather has an extensive, disruptive character. So it cannot be accurately said that it fosters anything at all, because the outcome of such an experience is only known by going through its process, by making the path by oneself. Encounters with the unknown may hurt us, but isolation from the unknown is equally dangerous, for it deprives us from learning from uncertainty. As long as there is, and always will be the unknown and uncertainty in the world we live in, learning to cope with it is a necessary part of human formation.

## Notes

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1. The person or organisation which is providing the experiential education programme. This can be part of a school curriculum, in which case the provider is the teacher, or be provided by private outfitters like firms specialized in outdoor education.
2. About sharing and reproduction, it is interesting to note the difference between rite (where the rite in its formal expression is repeated identically through time, with no concern about whether the individuals undergoing it live it the same way) and contemporary experience learning, where it is the outcomes of experience that must be identical regardless of form.
3. Plato describes *aporia* as a transitional stage, assuming that a learner must be stripped of misconceptions before true learning can occur (Burbules, 2000). It has long been considered as a sterile dead end, but is *aporia* only a barrier to knowledge? For an account of the reconsideration of *aporia* in education, cf. Burbules, Nicholas C. (2000), *Aporias, Webs and Passages: Doubt as an Opportunity to Learn*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 30:2, pp. 171-187.
4. In Derrida's original text, the word for crossing is *traversée*, a word generally used in French to refer to the crossing of the sea.
5. In another related example, the notion of a 'wilderness' once meant an area of the natural world as yet unknown and unexplored. Wildernesses now are mostly areas set aside for one reason or another (Giddens, 1991).

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