

Florian Schneider
(Extended)
Footnotes On
Education

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What follows is a series of loose considerations and fragmented thoughts relating to debates that have emerged over the past few years around the topic of education. On a rather abstract level, they are intended to reference discussions and struggles presently taking place in other fields; in another, more concrete sense, they might be of preliminary use in developing criteria for practical interventions in a situation widely perceived to be in crisis.

1. Learning

We learn nothing from those who say: “Do as I do.” Our only teachers are those who tell us to “do with me,” and are able to emit signs to be developed in heterogeneity rather than propose gestures for us to reproduce.¹

In the preface to his first, seminal work *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze articulates the challenges of pedagogy in a vivid, precise fashion. Deleuze claims that everything that teaches us something emits signs, and every act of learning is an interpretation of these signs or hieroglyphs. Using the example of learning how to swim, he points out that in practice we manage to deal with the challenge of keeping afloat only by grasping certain movements as signs. It is pointless to imitate the movements of the swimming instructor without understanding them as signs one has to decode and recompose in one’s own struggle with the water.

Such repetition is no longer that of the Same, “but involves difference – from one wave and one gesture to another, and carries that difference through the repetitive space thereby constituted.”² The potential of such an approach to teaching and learning is huge: as soon as a notion of learning is decoupled from the possession of knowledge, as soon as difference is liberated from identity, repetition from reproduction (or resistance from representation), we may encounter what is at stake in today’s debate about education.

Rather than simply lament the decline of public institutions, the ongoing privatization of knowledge, and the resulting precariousness of access to education, we should challenge ourselves to learn how to respond to the current situation without drowning in it.

The discovery of possible points of resistance to these oncoming waves of privatization, appropriation, and commodification of knowledge has become urgent.

The system of public education is threatened by a crisis with multiple sources, a crisis that exceeds the limits of our imagination and is essentially beyond measure since what is put into question is the very idea of

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measurement and commensurability as such. It is a crisis of property, which has become increasingly “imaginary” in the sense that one can no longer be sure of whether or not it is real.

In an age of cognitive capitalism, however, the crisis presents itself with the very same rhetoric of quantitative measurement that was so recently implicated in the near-collapse of the financial system. Certain risks present themselves as perfectly measurable as long as they are systematically obscured; their impact becomes noticeable only when it is too late.

The problem is not just that of the inherent difficulty of assessing how critical the situation is, it is that we have reached an impasse, a failure to generate counter-concepts that could characterize a different proposal, an alternative to the existing order. We are faced with a systemic crisis of the imagination.

How can we envision, design, develop, and enjoy environments in which one learns “with” someone else instead of “from” or “about” others, as Deleuze suggested? How can we invent, create, and compose “spaces of encounter with signs” in which distinctive points “renew themselves in each other, and repetition takes shape while disguising itself?”³ What would make these spaces different to the ones

we have been forced to experience in the past?

2. Exodus

The emergence of the modern educational system in the Western world was characterized by public institutions aimed at regulating the movements of both individuals and the collective social body in order to produce well-disciplined, coherent subjects on a mass scale.

Through a system of spatial control, the reproduction of gestures was drilled over and over again; the disciples’ proper internalization of these movements became the ruling principle of the passage from one disciplinary regime to the next. There was not a great deal to learn besides the fact that any kind of refusal of the discipline would lead to exclusion from one institution and referral to another.

It comes as no surprise that bodies of knowledge have been called “the disciplines.” The disciplinary institutions have organized education as a process of subjectivation that re-affirms the existing order and distribution of power in an endless loop. From the moment Nietzsche realized that, for the first time in history, knowledge “wants to be more than a mere means,” education has appeared as the arena of an inescapably circular relationship

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between the ways in which power can “produce knowledge, multiply discourse, induce pleasure, and generate power.”⁴

At a certain moment such circularity became uncomfortable. In the course of the 1980s, in both Western and Eastern Europe, an exodus took place: large segments of a generation who would normally have formed the next progressive intellectual elite refused to participate in the system of higher education in universities and academies. Unlike previous generations – especially those associated with the protest year 1968 – this generation did not consider the academic field (with its specific capacity to forgive the sins of one’s youth) as a semi-public arena or training ground for social struggles or radical political agendas.

Those who realized that it had become pointless to reproduce the gestures of their masters did not only understand that there was nothing left to learn from, within, or against the institutions; they decided to take an interest in precisely the disciplining character of those institutions, the confinement of knowledge and subjectivities, the exclusion of differing and deviant forms of knowledge production.

As a result, learning could suddenly take place anywhere: in the streets, in bars or clubs,

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in self-organized seminars, in the office spaces of so-called social movements, in soccer stadiums, through subcultural fanzines, in squatted houses or even science shops (“Wissenschaftsläden” as they were called in German).

At the same time, the topic of learning became increasingly popular, addressing everyday practices of resistance which, back then, were ignored by the traditional system and entered the academy only after a significant delay – like poststructuralist French theory, cultural studies, or postcolonial theory. There was a plethora of unexpected places where one could learn anything and everything, at least until the mass exodus from the educational institutions caused those institutions to discover a new territory: the network.

3. The Education of a Self

Today’s crisis of the educational system, with all its consequent phenomena, can also be understood as a result of the refusal to be subjugated by the command of an educational system that represents the fading paradigm of industrial capitalism. Many of those who made careers have managed to inject the knowledge they accumulated in subcultures and social



movements of the late 1970s and 1980s directly into the entrepreneurial experiments of a first wave of immaterial production by advertisement agencies, independent micro-enterprises and their cooperative networks, or new political conglomerations that popped up with the establishment of ecological networks and other social movements.

The advent of digital technologies and deregulated networks triggered a long-overdue process of deinstitutionalization and deregulation that from today's standpoint appears to be irreversible. This process was based on a fatal promise: self-organized access to knowledge, independent of any further mediation other than that of the medium itself.

Consequently, public institutions' state-approved monopoly over the manufacturing of knowledge gradually lost its function, its own existence rendered pointless or at least resistant to any kind of upgrade that would run the risk of radically putting their own functioning into question.

But the demise of public institutions laid the groundwork for turning education into a business, as Deleuze suspected early on:

In disciplinary societies you were always starting all over again (as you went from school to barracks, from barracks to factory), while in control societies you never finish anything . . . school is replaced by continuing education and exams by continuous assessment.⁵

All of a sudden, self-managed education is confronted with its caricature: the education of a self, subject to constant renegotiation and trading. The alleged rigidity of academic grading is replaced by all sorts of informal and proprietary codes ranging from corporate certificates to confirmations of internships. Above all, these codes stress the fact that one is not only responsible for oneself, for the evaluation of oneself, but also that the infinite process of self-examination is an end in itself.

As soon as learning becomes an exclusively private concern, the primary goal of what is by then a required self-education is to demonstrate and perform the permanent availability of the self in real time rather than just perform discipline in a system of spatial control. It becomes necessary to continuously perform "selves": not as mirror-images that reproduce the gestures of a master, but as self-managed profiles, animated images of a self that needs to be multiplied infinitely in order to satisfy the insatiable demand for omnipresence that renders possible the very idea of control.

Rather than being a re-appropriation of the means of education, the current proliferation of concepts of self-education points to a major shift in and a fundamental confusion about

configurations of the "self" in prevailing social thought.

4. Institutions and Ekstitutions

Under the banner of "self-education," the effort, the costs, and the resources needed to perform an efficient system of control are outsourced to the individual. Obviously, this goes along very well with the praise of chivalries such as horizontalism, flat hierarchies, charity, and sharing. Teamwork and a flattering notion of "collaboration" have turned out to be key components of a renewed educational managerialism.

In a society of control, the postulate of lifelong learning challenges traditional views of radical, emancipatory pedagogy in both institutional and non-institutional contexts. What was formerly known as "progressive" may all of a sudden and without warning turn out to be repressive, or indeed, vice-versa.

For this reason it is necessary to reevaluate the concepts of both institutions and their opponents: networked environments, deinstitutionalized and deregulated spaces such as informal networks, free universities, open academies, squatted universities, night schools, or proto-academies.

Institutions insist: basically they insist on the inequality between those who know and those who do not know. But they also insist that the unequal who has become equal will himself then drive the system that produces inequality by reproducing the process of its diminution. Institutions are based on the concept of limiting the transmission of knowledge, of managing the delay, of postponing equality indefinitely for the sake of infinite progress.

Networked environments or what could be called "ekstitutions" are based on exactly the opposite principle: they promise to provide instant access to knowledge. Ekstitutions exist: their main purpose is to come into being. They exist outside the institutional framework, and instead of infinite progress, they are based on a certain temporality.

What characterizes ekstitutions is their absolute indifference towards inequalities, since it does not matter at all who possesses knowledge and who does not. One can instantly get to know what one needs to know, even if only for a limited amount of time or from distinct places. This is the formula of the ekstitution's postulate of an equality that is essentially unfinished.

The challenge that ekstitutions permanently face is the question of organizing, while in institutional contexts the challenge is, on the contrary, the question of unorganizing. How can they become ever more flexible, lean,

dynamic, efficient, and innovative? In contrast, ekstitutions struggle with the task of bare survival. What rules may be necessary in order to render possible the mere existence of an ekstitution?

Like it or not, these rules need to establish an exclusivity, something which is of vital importance; by its very nature, the institution has to be concerned with inclusion. It is supposed to be open to everybody who meets the standards set in advance, while in ekstitutions admission is subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation.

The obscurity and nebulosity in accessing ekstitutions from the outside relates, paradoxically, to their egalitarian ideology, once one reaches the inside. In institutions it is usually the other way around: no matter how difficult, they need to be generally accessible from the outside; inside, obscurity rules, barely concealed by hierarchies, formalities, representative procedures.

Ekstitutions have usually appeared as alternatives to institutions, or at least they have emerged in that order. There are of course numerous examples of ekstitutions that have first evolved and then been swallowed up by institutions. The opposite direction is still hard to

even imagine, since an institution would rather cease to exist than abandon the pretense of its own infinitude.

It is crucial to acknowledge that institutions and ekstitutions cannot mix – there is no option of hybridity or of simultaneously being both, although this may very often be demanded by rather naïve third parties.

Today it seems that institutions and ekstitutions correspond to complementary rather than antagonistic modalities. What once appeared a challenge to the traditional educational framework, turns out in the current situation to be a correlate that compensates for the deficits of institutional frameworks that are gradually losing their conceits.

Probably the most underrated effect of the current crisis in education is a shift that has brought both institutions and ekstitutions much closer together. The privatization of learning has produced friction between these two different, once polarized, but now adjacent concepts.

Border economies have emerged, allowing an increased variety of actors to smoothly switch from the mode of institutions to that of ekstitutions and back – seemingly without compromise. They actually profit from the sharp boundaries between institutional frameworks

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and ekstitutional networks.

At the same time, new coalitions appear: in the past few years, waves of protest have emerged against cuts in public education, the rise of tuition fees, and staff layoffs. Rather than original propositions or sharp conclusions, these movements demonstrate a new desire for alliances across the boundaries of groups that are reduced to clienteles once education becomes a business. But there is also a manifest interest in what will appear beyond the institution and its diminishing privileges: precarious labor, lifelong apprenticeship, permanent self-monitoring and self-profiling, and so forth.

5. A New Division of Labor?

It is that friction zone, the wider or narrower grey area between institutions and ekstitutions, that matters strategically: here the fault lines of a new division of immaterial labor are currently taking shape.

Under the regime of Fordism, highly skilled, white-collar workers calculated the time necessary to perform a certain task on the assembly line, and low-skilled, blue-collar workers repeated the gestures invented by their masters. The idea behind such a division of labor is usually described as an increase in efficiency: the production process is broken down into a series of steps that do not require any knowledge about the overall process; the result being a dramatic deskilling of labor, which then had to be concerned only with a specific task.

Costs were expected to decrease enormously with a systematic focus on precision, specialization, and, most importantly, the synchronization of the steps that had to be measured in time and compared against the output of others.

At first sight, it may appear as one of the paradoxes of the current debate about education that what is known as the “Bologna Process” attempts to introduce absolutely equivalent ideas of specialization, synchronization, and commensurability into a system of knowledge production that has traditionally been immune to the virtues of the standardized mass production of commodities.

It is even more surprising that these initiatives have arisen long after the Fordist model of the assembly line was surpassed by paradigms like “teamwork” that aim to encourage workers, reorganized in groups, to take overall responsibility and self-control their labor performance.

Material and immaterial production seem to have swapped some of their attributes: once considered un-commodifiable, knowledge has been turned into a standardized commodity form

subject to the rudest forms of propertization, while industrial products arrive in ever more customized and singularized forms, pleasing the sophisticated desires of an increasingly differentiated customer base.

But the seemingly contradictory character of these intertwining processes may also indicate that there is another, greater shift taking place that concerns the social division of labor over and above the technical, perhaps indicating an entire reformulation and reconfiguration of the separation between manual and intellectual labor as such.

The key element of Frederick Taylor’s “scientific management” was the expropriation from workers of any production-specific knowledge in order to make the best use of expensive machinery. Through an analysis of the relevant temporal sequences, the management was able to appropriate the competence of which it was formerly deprived, knowledge that high-skilled blue-collar workers were reluctant to share with their employers. “Scientific management” claimed to mathematically systematize the expropriated knowledge and return it to the workers as alienated forms of knowledge reduced to mathematical formulas for “sliding scales” that calculated respective time targets for the fragmented work.

The appropriation of workers’ concrete experience and its abstraction as engineering science constituted a specific separation of manual and intellectual labor that seems constitutive for modern notions of science.

If we understand the situation today as the passage from a formal subsumption of immaterial labor under the rules of capital towards a real subsumption of the same, the historical analogies to Taylor’s and Ford’s intensification of the exploitation of the labor force are striking.

In the context of increased attention to the creative industries, the very idea of a systematic measurability of practices that were supposed to be essentially beyond measure has had to be sought, developed, and enforced at the core of knowledge production – in universities, design schools, and art academies. Such measurability does not emerge naturally, it cannot be discovered or researched. It needs to be implemented through the appropriation of a knowledge that has until recently been alien to capital.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of measuring the labor power of a highly skilled proletarian worker would probably have appeared as absurd as if one were to consider the immaterial work of a computer programmer or professor at an art academy today. But as with the worker, capital will once again discard

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further ontological considerations and proceed to establish a system of temporal quantification for the sake of global exchangeability. The outcomes are foreseeable: a deskilling of the cognitive workforce through fragmentation and its resynchronization under the command of creative capital, as well as the alienation of living knowledge and its innovative potential.

The current crisis of the global financial system is only accelerating this process of expropriating specific knowledge. Budget cuts in public institutions, the privatization of the educational system, the precarization of (not only) immaterial work, and the excesses of imaginary property in general will create, on a wider scale, the experimental conditions for the technical elaboration of methods of measurement.

Finally, late capitalism can only survive a few more decades by way of an unseen intensification of exploitation in immaterial production. This would need to happen to at least the same extent as Fordism managed to reinvent itself against the growing self-confidence of proletarian workers.

6. The Virtual Studio

Historically, the workers' movement responded to the redesign of the factory as assembly line by reinventing the concept of the union. Rather than a lean and flexible militant network that had to struggle with persecution in the workplace and in political life (such as the "socialist laws" in the 1880s in Germany), the very idea of the union

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was redesigned as a hierarchical mass organization with a bureaucratic apparatus capable of accommodating the talented leaders of the movement, a majority of whom were not able to adapt to the changing conditions of a deskilled workplace.

Today's crisis may suggest a different response: in the tension between institutions and ekstitions, new formats of organizing and unorganizing have to be invented, which – certainly not in the first place, but maybe in the long run – may lead to a reconceptualization of the idea of the "union" as a tactical and strategic alliance of very heterogeneous actors.

Neither self-institutionalization nor a further deregulation in networks remain as options. Instead, we need to ask how to reconnect actors who operate in a field characterized by an indispensable "nonalignment" towards both the privatization of knowledge as well as the fading power of public institutions. The outlines of such a project are beginning to show themselves, albeit still in very rudimentary forms; and of course they will be contested and subject to wild criticism from all parties involved and not involved. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to develop experimental formats for generating findings that bring forward a process of "self-valorization" of knowledge that jumps across the pitfalls of the contemporary self.

Not as a conclusion, but rather as a very preliminary proposal, one of these formats thought to resist the sliding scales of neo-



Qaddafi's tent.

Taylorism in the creative industries could be entitled “virtual studio.” In the first instance, the studio has striking associations with both the workplace in creative industries and the permanent need for self-organized studies.

A studio as such is configured as a working environment that is not confined to the individual but opens up to possible worlds, to a multitude of collaborations, in unforeseeable and unexpected ways. Such collaborations are not directed towards a notion of the “common”: distinguished by logistics or infrastructure, studios can be used for very different purposes and by very different occupants; or the same occupants can constantly reconfigure a studio according to changing goals and needs.

A virtual studio is characterized by a setting that allows actors to switch their selves between varying coulisses, blue screens, and sceneries, actualizing experiences that are only virtually there. Everything is imaginary, but that does not lower the impact of what we perceive. On the contrary, it urges us to question and challenge the very notion of experience.

At the same time, any form of studio acts as a learning space that is neither public nor private. While remaining open to a varying degree it enables a specific focus on problems that are unresolved and may not be resolved easily. At a minimum it allows us to rediscover a notion of learning that is productive rather than reproductive, that is compositive rather than representational.

But the virtual studio is more than just a place. It needs to be understood as a “time-space,” expressing the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships; very much like how in Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of literature the chronotope was “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied,”⁶ the virtual studio is the place where organizing and unorganizing can happen simultaneously. It is a distinct point where time and space intersect and fuse, enabling a new engagement with reality.

Precisely in the context of resisting the forces currently let loose to measure, compare, and commodify networked knowledge and render it susceptible to new forms of imaginary property, the virtual studio insists on the distinctiveness of a specific spatial arrangement that is not reproducible as such.

Furthermore, this distinction is supported by the very notion of the “working” mode; it asserts the unfinished character of the studies undertaken, which culminates in an otherwise precluded appreciation for the aleatory essence of both working and studying.

Ultimately, one may be able to rediscover in studio-like configurations a Deleuzian notion of

learning “with” instead of “from” or “about.” Such a “with” reveals the truly collaborative character of working and learning. Collaborations resist any predefined notion of a common denominator, a common ground or a common goal, since they defy the technical division of labor that characterizes any form of cooperation in the last instance.

In that respect, collaborations are a practical way of reading the division of labor against the grain, and may turn out to be a way of swimming against the current of an enforced and blatantly absurd measurability of immaterial labor. Only in collaborative environments is it possible to embrace the infinitesimality of what is essentially beyond measure. The outcome of a collaboration is rampant, unforeseeable, and always unexpected. Sometimes it may not turn out nicely, it may even be harsh, but one thing is for sure: it cannot be calculated, it has to be imagined.

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Florian Schneider is a filmmaker, based in Munich. Over the past ten years he has been involved in a wide range of projects that deal with the implications of postmodern border regimes on both theoretical and practical level.

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1
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1994), 23.

2
Ibid., 23.

3
Ibid., 23.

4
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 180.
Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 73.

5
Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 179.

6
M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 250.

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