

# Facing up to the modern world by giving students control of their own education

*by Professor Philippe Meirieu  
Professor of Education, Université LUMIERE–Lyon 2*

## **1) *Modernity versus education for freedom***

Contemporary society is simultaneously carried forward by the drive for enlightenment and threatened by serious reversals. The widening of the gap between developed and poor countries, the marginalization of young people and the exclusion of the more fragile, the globalisation of technology, the rise of opposing communities, all-powerful media, and the rise of celebrity – cult politics ... all this puts our future in great danger. Perhaps more significantly, the triumph of the market economy, which today monopolizes both services and institutions, engages our contemporaries in a permanent race for consumption which has become the driving force of all their behaviour.

We are now faced with a completely new phenomenon in world history: the whim, previously only a stage in the individual development of the child, has become the organising principle of our collective development. Our society functions on whims as a motor-car functions on petrol. The "urge to buy" - as specialists call the consumer whim – has become the very foundation of what we believe to be our economic development. One must seduce the consumer, instil in him a feeling which is impossible to resist, anaesthetise by any means his capacity for reflection, oblige him to buy in order to conform to the norm, endlessly develop new desires and entrap him in a forward movement to which a permanent sense of dissatisfaction and falling into debt are the inevitable corollaries.

The child, of course, always goes through a stage where he feels all-powerful and able to command people and things. When one speaks of primal narcissism or infantile egocentricity, the same phenomenon is emphasised: the child, entangled in desires which he is as yet incapable of naming or recognising in his interactions with others, is tempted to act upon them; he cannot wait, and does not understand that his desires cannot be immediately and systematically satisfied. The educator must thus accompany him patiently along the path of delay and teach him not to react immediately with either violence or resignation, but take the time to question, to anticipate, to reflect, to govern his impulses and to build his willpower. It is a question of disposition and attitudes and thus a pedagogical affair. One cannot emerge alone from the

infantile state: one needs to be reconciled with social structures which make sense of delay and permit a glimpse of the promise of future satisfaction, in spite of inevitable frustrations. This matter is never completely resolved: the infantile state dogs us into maturity and the temptation remains, at all ages, to abolish otherness and to reinstate oneself, even for a moment, on the tyrant's throne.

Now the reason for today's crisis is that the whole of our social machinery, far from supplying the bases on which the child can rely to emerge from the infantile state, repeats incessantly exactly that principle from which education must teach him to detach himself: "Your impulses are your orders." Publicity short-circuits any reflection and glorifies immediate action. Television zaps faster than the viewers in order to glue them to the screen and prevent them turning to another channel. The mobile phone reduces human relations to the management of instant commands. It is not a plot hatched by the generation of '68 to sabotage the education of the people – it is a conspiracy: everything works together and whispers in the ear of children and adolescents alike: "Now, at once, no matter what it costs!" Mimicry and tribalism anaesthetise all genuine desire and transform people into cogs of impulse in the consumer machine. The hegemony of marketing ends in a "zero temperature of thought".

In these conditions we must not be surprised that it is difficult to educate today: parents know how much energy is necessary to counteract the power of fashion and brand names; the stereotypes imposed by the network of youth and reiterated in the media. Teachers note every day how difficult it is to create an effective working environment to allow concentration, to develop self-control or investment in a task. They see their students arrive in class with a remote control grafted to their brain, a high-tech phallus which destroys all the scholastic procedures which they struggle to put in place.

## **2) *The straight-jacket or education ?***

Faced with this tidal-wave of infantilism, which puts the institution itself in question, magic formulae are making a killing: "restoring authority", changing reading methods and teaching the four maths operations from the first year of primary, are presented as a means to save education and the Republic at the same time! This would represent a triumph for the technocratic principle when, on the contrary, what is required is to deliberately create pedagogical situations where the child discovers through experience that instant gratification is deadly and that the only desire possible is obtained through the construction of a timescale.

But, faced with this tidal-wave of infantilism, which thanks to technology can take such barbarous forms as *happy slapping*<sup>1</sup>, totalitarian thought is also advancing stealthily. It feeds on fear and unfolds according to an unvarying logic: identify, as early as possible, any individual deviations, circumvent them by isolating and treating any "trouble", classifying and separating individuals and subjecting them to a chosen logic controlled by private forces. This would represent a triumph for "soft" standardisation, mandated by a liberal

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<sup>1</sup> Recording on a mobile phone of violent games in which a child is humiliated or even tortured.

individualism, when, on the contrary what is required is to unblock the development of individual destinies in allowing the free circulation of ideas, in permitting individuals to put themselves at risk in improbable projects and to encounter opportunities to become involved and to build society.

The major preoccupation of teachers – and that which exhausts them today – is thus to *lower tension* in order to *encourage attention*. As long as teachers live in fear of losing control, as long as they are faced with groups of over-excited pupils incapable of concentrating on a task, as long as their energies are drained by children with unpredictable behaviour, one cannot hope for any significant improvement in school results. And faced with this reality we must choose: either a disciplinary treatment or a pedagogical treatment. We must try and contain any explosions by reinforcing control mechanisms and developing institutional, technical and chemical straight-jackets. Or we must work on the conditions and activities which could allow children and adolescents to learn to concentrate. It is either sanctions and Ritalin or pedagogy.

If we choose pedagogy then we can draw on the heritage which has been handed down to us ... We should turn again to Pestalozzi's *Lettre de Stans*<sup>2</sup> in order to understand how we can mobilise the « inner strength » of children by paying meticulous attention to those « little things » which enable them to find stability... We should study afresh the work of Maria Montessori who uses the term « absorbing spirit » to describe the capacity of the little child to plunge himself into an activity: instead of distracting him with artificial tasks, we should accompany, develop and guide his own input.... We should rethink the idea of attention by studying once more the work of Claparède on « motivation » : to be attentive does not mean to be receptive, but to seek, in a project, to answer questions which one has formulated beforehand .... We must consider the extreme importance of the procedures offered by « institutional pedagogy »; procedures which offer the child, at the same time, a framework within which to operate and a position from which he can speak ... We must think again about the status of artistic and sporting disciplines, which have recently been excluded from the « base curriculum » and which are, however, an excellent means for training those who are most given to uncoordinated behaviour to concentrate.

More globally, and as a continuation of the whole pedagogical tradition, we must study the way in which we strive against those coagulations of students which pass today for « classes ». We must draw up strict working groups where everyone has his place and is not tempted to dominate. A pedagogy of discovery must be articulated which makes sense of learning and a pedagogy of rigorous formalisation which enables the student to embrace it. School time must be given a linear organisation through a « foreman of works pedagogy », so that everyone can find a place within a project and cease to clamour for everything, immediately, all the time ... All levels of the school and all school disciplines can and should be involved in this exercise. But for the school to be truly efficient its action should be carried on by all the stakeholders. Within families and associations, within geographical communities and institutions as a whole, we should put in place collective projects capable of counterbalancing the globalised whim; raising the question, in the last resort, whether an

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.meirieu.com/PATRIMOINE/lettredestans.pdf>

education for democracy is indeed compatible with the over-arching power of the market.

For pedagogy itself now leads us to ask social questions which still remain largely obscured: can one continue to regard the child as a consumer target, a captive audience for publicity? For some years now the credits at the end of cartoons have been gradually abandoned so as to avoid the child changing stations and thus zapping the advertising: who is worrying about this? ... Should we not finally take the question of the media seriously by making good the claim that their freedom of expression operates within a democracy and should thus be accompanied by a responsibility for education? Audiovisual public services currently broadcast numerous programmes on pets or betting while the public radio devotes thirteen times more air-time to the Stock Market than to education: ... is this normal? Should we not put into place a renewal of interest in popular education to counteract the consumer frenzy for leisure and culture? The growing offers in this field, after all, only serve those who have the intellectual and financial means to take advantage of them: should we resign ourselves to this? Should we not make parental support a political priority? Parents in difficulty today are regarded as delinquents or mental cases: however, who can claim to have all the answers to the questions raised by the behaviour of young people? ... Should we not oblige all institutions and companies to subscribe to an educational job-description enumerating requirements in the matter of reception of small children, reception of school-age children, the employment of interns, partnership with schools? Nowadays only a few specially trained adults are able to transmit their knowledge and experience to the younger generations: should this mission not be the task of everyone?

In the end it is the very status of education in our society which is in question: should it remain a marginal activity in the service of a triumphal economy, or should it permeate all levels of society and allow it to move forward into the future?

### **3) *The educational challenge of today : enable the student to see himself as the subject of his studies***

It is from this viewpoint that we may identify the characteristics of the student-subject and match them with the corresponding pedagogical offers. But the result of such an exercise must be used with care. By definition a *subject* is a whole, a single unit, an intention which is implicated in its entirety in all its actions; it is not possible to separate out the component parts. *A fortiori*, a list such as this should never be used as a reference; it is, in the best of cases, a control panel, or a means of inspiring reflection and pedagogical creativity. The different aspects are not presented by order of importance, nor by the chronological order of their appearance, but they are all closely dependent one upon the other ... they are the inseparable aspects of a single project.

- 1. *A student-subject is able to live in the world without becoming the centre of his world.*** In a school or a class, a working group or a team, he strives to occupy his own place

and not dominate. He does not feed off the teacher, nor his classmates. He does not engulf the institution ... Instead he progressively detaches himself from his former narcissistic behaviour, abandons the attempt to impose his whims upon others and accepts becoming part of a united community ... In order to achieve this he requires help in identifying the roles he can play within the community and needs supervision to prevent him overreaching himself in any of these. Through exploration and the systematic rotation of tasks, he discovers that a group is not merely a conglomeration of identical individuals, but a coherent and open network which gives rise to projects in which each and every one may become involved.

2. **The student-subject is able to overcome his impulses.** He takes the time to examine the legitimacy of his actions in the light of the possible consequences for himself, for others, for the group in its entirety and for society as a whole ... Between the impulse and the action he has progressively put into place a time for reflection and study: he knows how to control himself and has learned to ask questions ... In order to achieve this he needs to acquire the tools which will enable him to express himself but in a deferred timescale and in a context which can contain any excesses. Through the accepted procedures, the waiting period, the act of writing and using the advice of other students, he learns to benefit from the delay, to distance himself from impulsive action and from ignoring the chance to speak to others and reflect for himself, which can generate bitterness and violence.
3. ***The student-subject is able to transform his desire to know into a desire to learn.*** He does not seek instant efficacy at any price, but strives to understand the phenomena he encounters ... He has progressively become capable of transforming the enjoyment of *successful accomplishment* into the pleasure of the *act of understanding*. He experiences a specific satisfaction in giving a human form to the world by constructing theoretic models for it. He knows that the power of these models, however modest, allows him to resist the over-attractive and constantly blinding illusions of the concrete... To achieve this he needs to be involved in projects which are both accessible and difficult, which will present him with obstacles to overcome and which will give him the opportunity to reformulate his perception of things. In discovering that which destroys his desire for instant success, he is brought to analyse his mistakes and to give himself new frames of reference.
4. ***The student-subject is able to move beyond himself to hear and understand the points of view of others.*** He takes these points of view into account in order to question his own conclusions. He is thus able to improve them and adjust them progressively to the situations in which he finds himself ... He has understood that the questions and objections of others

enable him to re-examine his own actions. He has also progressively succeeded in anticipating his own reactions, even in the absence of others, and can thus direct his efforts and improve his performances ... In order to achieve this, he needs to be placed systematically in situations of cooperation, of reciprocal correction and to take a critical viewpoint of his own work. Similarly, he needs help in setting up a system of formative evaluation which will give value to the progress he achieves by this means. Finally he needs to be challenged so that every task entrusted to him is regarded as a « chef d'œuvre » enabling him to surpass himself and to achieve perfection.

5. ***The student-subject is able to concentrate his attention and to immerse himself fully in any physical or mental action.*** He is able to ignore any kind of distraction within himself or outside. He is able to concentrate on what he is doing in such a way that his purpose inhabits his whole body and mind .... He has felt the importance of self-control and knows that this is obtained not by shutting himself off but, on the contrary, by remaining completely open to the project on which he has decided to concentrate his whole effort. He has experienced this particular form of being present to himself when he is fully concentrated, when one forgets oneself completely the better to concentrate on the task in hand ... In order to achieve this he needs to be placed in situations which are strictly formalised, to pass through stages which enable him to empty his mind, to concentrate on an object, a text, a word a sound or an idea. He needs to have the crucial experience of artistic expression: from calligraphy to drama, from photography to dance, from music to cinema. But he can also discover this attitude in the meticulous preparation of an experiment in chemistry, in astronomical observation or in the accomplishment of a programme of gymnastics .. whenever uncoordinated movement is replaced by a precise gesture, wherever diffused action is replaced by concentration on a given moment, where one challenges oneself and one's being.
6. ***The student-subject is able to resist the temptation or the influence of a given object, person or group.*** He is aware of the fascination, or even the hypnotic effect, of an encounter whenever it reflects his own image, echoes his own fantasies and allows him to be attracted to himself, under the guise of being attracted to something or someone else. But he has understood the danger of trading an escape from solitude against identification with a unifying group which obliges him to conform and submit to its leader ... He recognises the price which this exacts: the impossibility of existing outside such a group, the negation of any degree of otherness, exclusion and symbolic death if one seeks to emancipate oneself ... For this reason, and in order to become progressively able to exist and

to think for himself, he needs the authorisation of adults to dare to be different. He needs his teachers to be his allies to help him resist all pressure to conform whether to family, tribal, commercial or ideological norms. And he can achieve this all the more successfully in the classroom which is a place in which competence is the only legitimate form of authority ... where experience and access to documents permits the de-sanctification of the spoken word ... where each and every one may dare to express a critical or divergent point of view without the risk of exclusion.

7. ***The student-subject is able to disassociate knowledge and belief.*** Of course he will never be able to fulfil this task completely: no matter how rigorous knowledge may be it will always contain certain imprecisions, blind spots and other elements which cannot be completely rationalised. This is the other side of the coin: our knowledge will always be affected by our beliefs, just as our beliefs have always been affected by our knowledge. However, nothing is more important than to attempt to distinguish between the two ... This is precisely the role of the school: to help us discover that which unites us over and above our particular backgrounds and our personal choices ... That is why we learn there to differentiate between « what we are talking about » and « what is said about it », what is written from what we may think, what we see from how we interpret. The subject may grow through a process of reasoning by confronting elements which resist him and with which he engages in genuine dialogue. He may grow through interaction with others which, if it is monitored by careful adults, will enable him to progressively acquire a need for truth.
8. ***The student-subject has developed an innate demand for precision, accuracy and truth.*** Whatever the task assigned to him he is not content with half-measures and does not limit himself to mediocrity but tries to go as far as he is able. He knows that even the most modest-seeming tasks, if they are carried out to the utmost of his capabilities, can bring intense satisfaction and can lead him to perfection ... The fact is that human intelligence can only expand to its true dimension when it is used from within, through a quest for perfection, when the subject strives to be as rigorous as possible with himself and in what he is doing ..... This is why the teacher not only transmits his knowledge to the student, but also his attitude towards that knowledge. If the teacher behaves like a landlord who rents his property which must be restored on the day of the examination, the student will simply develop a strategy of thought: he will evaluate the better ratio of quality / price and will only strive to give a good account of himself and of what he has learned. If, on the other hand, the teacher sees himself as a true researcher in his field of knowledge, and if he assumes an attitude of permanent investigation of what he knows and of the

means to transmit this to the student, the student, perceiving the particular wavelength of a thought at work, will become progressively able to launch himself into the adventure. (Meirieu, 2005)

9. ***The student subject is able to transform the impulses which he feels.*** If the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have taught us anything, as much through philosophers such as Nietzsche, Marx or Freud, as through the terrible convulsions of our history, it is that we cannot hope to rid ourselves once and for all of our archaic impulses. It is impossible in our day and age to imagine man finally at peace, guided by the Humanities and having abandoned all desire to dominate the world or rule over his fellow-men. It is impossible to believe in the coming of a peaceful society in which the « noble savage» will have stamped out all form of conflict ... We all remain, more or less, monsters, ogres who can scarcely love another being without devouring it. Violence is an integral part of our makeup and there is not one individual on earth who is incapable of falling at some time or other into the most terrible excesses. The myth of the werewolf is, in this regard, an acceptable human metaphor and we should, no doubt, continue to tell it to our children in one form or another so that they may understand the contradiction of adults ...

Should we, however, when faced with fleeting glimpses or sudden upsurges of the inhuman in us, resign ourselves to the inevitable development of control systems and tools of restraint? Education offers another choice: it proposes the possibility for any individual to transform their impulses into creative energy, into artistic invention or scientific research. It puts its money on sublimation rather than repression, convinced, furthermore, that repression is, in the long run, much more costly than giving men the chance to discover their own intelligence and solidarity. It believes that it is possible for a human being to take his place in a communal story, to recognise himself in the works which have left their mark on him, to make the world a better place by his actions and his initiatives ...from the smallest everyday gesture to the most important decision that each and every one of us is called upon to take in our personal, professional or civic lives ... This is why it falls to the school – along with other institutions such as the family or the community structure - to enable all students to find the means to become involved in activities where they can transform their impulses ... tame the passage of time in order to aspire to true desire ... and discover through creation, that man's future is not written in stone and that they can play their part in it.



### **Conclusion...**

Opportunities must be offered to one and all. By showing the quiet successes which prefigure the possibility of great victories in the face of fate. By giving hints of hitherto unsuspected fields of expression. By offering opportunities to become even timidly involved, to pick oneself up after a reversal, to understand one's mistakes. By offering the means to turn one's obsessions to good account and to channel one's violence. By offering the chance to serve others, to find a place within a group and to succeed sufficiently to become able to explore other places ... While modernity gives itself over to the frantic management of differences, pedagogy is the bearer of ethics and otherness. It is not restful. It is even profoundly irritating to all those who imagine that organisation and management are the final answer for the human condition.

However teachers are necessary, even if they are in the minority or on the margins. Men and women must take up the challenge. We are doubtless unable at the present time to stop the rise of control mechanisms, classifications and restraint. Zealous organisers, both right- and left-wing, are preparing a world where the child, reduced to a bar-code, will, from the earliest age, be «streamed in accordance with his capabilities and aptitudes». This selection, hitherto tentative and homespun, runs the serious risk in the years to come of assuming industrial proportions. It is possible that in spite of all kinds of evasions on the part of the public, we will not be able to escape this systematic sorting process. Testing, evaluating, directing, controlling, sanctioning will become permanent and obsessional activities, if they have not already done so, both in school and elsewhere. Without an antidote we shall die of asphyxiation. We must put a little room for manoeuvre and a little of ourselves into play. We should not be embarrassed to be those who «put a spanner in the works». On the contrary. But let us not hope to receive any thanks for the moment. Teachers, throughout history, have been trouble-makers. They accepted that role. Let us accept our role calmly too. By struggling everywhere and every day against all forms of fatalism. By inventing together the means to help students stand on their own two feet and decide on their destiny. And without forgetting, after all, to propose alternatives to a scholastic organisation which has not yet truly learned how to make the student the subject of his own learning.