

A horizon of freedom: Using Foucault to think differently about education and learning

Power and Education

2019, Vol. 11(2) 132–144

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1757743819838289

journals.sagepub.com/home/pae**Stephen J Ball** 

Institute of Education, University College London, UK

Abstract

Building on the work of others, this article sketches out what a Foucauldian ‘education’ might look like in practice, considers some of the challenges, paradoxes and (im)possibilities with which such an ‘education’ would face us, and indicates some of the cherished conceits and reiterated necessities that we must give up if we take seriously the need for an education that fosters an orientation to critique and curiosity. Three elements of Foucault’s ‘philosophical ethos’ that might be translated into educational practices are addressed: first, fostering a learning environment that encourages experimentation; second, enabling the development of an awareness of one’s current condition as defined and constructed by the given culture and historical moment; and, third, encouraging an attitude or disposition to critique – a focus on the production of particular sorts of dispositions that would be valued and fostered. All of this raises issues about ‘the teacher’.

Keywords

Foucault, self-formation, critique, refusal

Introduction

The aim of this article is modest. It is an attempt to explore some possibilities for what might be called a Foucauldian education – that is, a form of education that places critique at its centre and which rests on the contingency of power and truth and subjectivity, and thus opens up opportunities of refusal and self-formation. This draws from and builds on a number of existing forays into the use of Foucault’s later work to ‘think differently’ (*penser autrement*) about teaching and learning (see, for example, Chokr, 2009; Infinito, 2003a; Leask, 2011; Allan, 1999; Pignatelli, 1993; Butin, 2001).

Corresponding author:

Stephen J Ball, Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.

Email: stephen.ball@ucl.ac.uk

Overall, in educational studies there has been a tendency to interpret and use Foucault as a philosopher of oppressions, drawing primarily on the work of his *middle period* and its focus on the problem of power, and in particular on *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1979). From this, the means of correct training – the panopticon, normalisation, etc. – are deployed to explore, or more often redescribe, the processes of schooling, or the experience of teaching and learning, in terms of surveillance, classification and exclusion.¹ In this vein, some refer to Foucault's 'bleak' and one-sided vision of modernity (for example, McNay, 2013; Scheurich and Bell McKenzie, 2005) or his analysis as revealing 'the grim truth of the education process – namely, that it is a core element in the mechanics of modern disciplinarity' (Leask, 2011: 59). Those are proper readings of and uses of Foucault, and ones that he acknowledged, but they are also partial. What is missing from such renditions is a sense of the purpose and thrust of Foucault's analytical endeavours – that is, his intention to destabilise, to make things 'not as necessary as all that' (Foucault, 1971: 8). Foucault, as a philosopher of contestation and difference, seeks to undermine self-evidences and open up spaces for acting and thinking differently about our relation to ourselves and to others, and identify and refuse and transgress the horizon of silent objectification within which we are articulated. Such critique enables us to recognise that the things, values and events that make up our present experience 'have been constituted historically, discursively, practically' (Mahon, 1992: 14) and, indeed, that the self, our subjectivity, is historically produced in and through technologies and relations of power (see below). The point here for Foucault is not simply to record mundane processes of *ways in which we are made subject to*; rather, it is a means of opening up possibilities of self-formation. Foucault does not intend that his analyses produce a horizon of absolute subjection and domination, but rather the opposite – a horizon of freedom. As he put it:

My role – and that is too emphatic a word – is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. (Foucault, in Martin et al., 1988: 9)

Nonetheless, the task of enacting this as a programme of education is made particularly challenging inasmuch as the space of enactment, of possibility, that Foucault's critique intends to produce is a space of transgression and experiment, not of prescription. Thus, what is offered here can only be some possibilities and starting points, provocations rather than firm proposals. The article adds to an existing string of dots and temporary abutments. There is also a problem regarding terminology – I use the terms 'pedagogy', 'curriculum', 'assessment' and 'teacher' at points in the article when there is no alternative to refer to aspects of educational experience while at the same time starting from a position of critique that seeks to displace these concepts and practices, and all their connotations.

The article begins by outlining Foucault's use of critique as 'a means of maintaining mobility of mind and spirit; of avoiding a fixed, stabilized view of the ever-changing present; of maintaining a critical awareness of oneself and the place and time in which one resides' (Batters, 2011: 1). Critique is a technology for clearing away things we take as natural and necessary, in order to begin elsewhere. Critique is also a tactic for establishing the contingency of truth, power and subjectivity. From that starting point, the article outlines the possibilities of refusal and self-formation as the basis of pedagogy as ethico-politics and curriculum as genealogy and the fostering of the disposition of curiosity. It then addresses

the problem of the teacher and the teacher–learner relation. The sections intertwine and overlap in various ways.

Critique and freedom

The essence of Foucault's critique is a curiosity towards the arts of being governed and 'all of those practices and discourses that seek to homogenise subjectivity, to make it uniform, and narrow the spoke of freedom' (Milchman and Rosenberg, 2011: 12) – of which schooling would be a case in point. This is a permanent orientation of scepticism, 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality' (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987: 39). This requires not just a 'gesture of rejection'; rather, 'we have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers' (45). These possibilities of freedom are more directly and clearly explored in the *later* Foucault; more precisely, around 1980, he began to articulate a *politics of the care of the self* (Foucault, 2016). What I want to explore here are some of the ways this later work enables us to think education differently, in particular in relation to the concept of *self-formation* – that is, education as the production of a subject 'capable of turning back upon itself: of critically studying the processes of its own constitution, but also subverting them and effecting changes in them' (Oksala, 2005: 165). *Self-formation* in this sense is a starting point for experiments with an education or educations that do not simply reconstitute what has failed in the past. Starting with *self-formation* enables and requires us to dismantle the tired and constraining imaginary architecture of schooling – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – and its very particular grammar or meanings and concomitant social arrangements of space and time – which we call an education.

Here, drawing on and using ideas and propositions adumbrated by a small group of Foucauldian constructivists (noted above), I will sketch out what a Foucauldian education might look like in practice, and consider some of the challenges, paradoxes and impossibilities with which it would face us, and indicate some of the cherished conceits and reiterated necessities that we must give up if we take seriously the possibility of an education that fosters a permanent orientation to curiosity. However, to reiterate, if we wish to take up the *later* Foucault as a starting point for thinking education differently, there is no template to follow, no guidelines for an educational programme, rather some poorly marked tracks and vague signposts that are starting points. Following Foucault's style and 'method', what is offered is not a programmatic account of some alternative to what *is*. As he suggests, we cannot conceive of alternatives within the discursive possibilities we currently inhabit. We are bound by epistemic rules and closures that enable and constrain us to think within certain versions of what is and might be true – the conditions of possibility of modern thought, established practices of remembering and forgetting, and an exteriority that is prior to any conscious activity of a meaningful subjectivity. As Foucault (1997: 230) explained: 'I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system'.

Furthermore, in seeking to think differently, we must leave behind any desire to find a foundational metaphysics for critical action and strive to escape 'the over-used, colonised lexicon of critical education' (Zalloua, 2004: 239). Rather, we must embrace 'the power of strangeness' and the inevitability of failure, and 'resist the obscuring clarity of rational philosophical discourse' (Carroll, 1982: 181), and thus make both our present and our past alien to us. We must struggle with the idea of ourselves as 'both a discursively produced effect and a viable site of resistance' (Zalloua, 2004: 234). This is ethics as a practice rather than a plan, as 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself' (Foucault, 1983:

263) – a question of how we govern our own conduct, both our behaviour and our purposes, and the possibility of unending change both to ourselves and to the ‘arrangements’ in which we contingently find ourselves.

Authoring one’s ethical self

Foucault was adamant that there is no simple relationship between critique and action. The main task is as much, or perhaps even more, one of refusal as it is resistance. ‘Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are’ (Foucault, 2000: 336). This is a *negative ethics*, not a matter of asserting ideals, but rather an aestheticism – an imaginative creativity. This is a form of ethico-politics that is visceral rather than abstract, rooted as much in the physical and emotional as it is in logic. It rests on a refusal to accept the grounds on which subjectivity is proposed within dominant discourses and a willingness to subvert them – a subversion that is transformative rather than just disruptive. This creativity focuses on the care of the self and of others, and involves both the *techne* of the self and the *techne* of life. It is the cultivation of, on the one hand, a self that is a product of and a disruption of various discourses and, on the other, the practice of the art of living well and living differently, relating to others in different ways. This is the construction of a *heterotopia* (Tamboukou, 2006), both intellectual and practical, in which space and time are reconfigured differently and within which it is possible to make oneself thinkable in a different way – to become other than how you find yourself – that is a search for ‘other’ experiences.² In these respects, self-formation is an active and engaged process, based on questioning and learning from the immediate and quotidian, on forming and testing at the same time – an ‘exercise of oneself in the activity of thought’ (Foucault, 1992: 9).

All of this would involve a plurality of refusals, resistances and struggles against local fixations of power in specific sites, in part through ‘counter-conducts’ (Davidson, 2001; Meade, 2014) and creative strategies of non-compliance that then open up possibilities of ‘autonomous and independent subjectivation, that is, possibilities for the constitution of oneself’ (Lazzarato, 2009: 114). Counter-conducts are active interventions in the ethical domain, refusals to be governed this way, the cultivation of the arts of ‘voluntary insubordination, and a practice of reflective intractability’ (Foucault, 1997: 32). Such practices of refusal show us that ‘the production of something new in the world might be possible’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1991: 163). They are vehicles or opportunities for exploring new forms of existence, of being ‘otherwise’.

Refusal offers the potential for a repoliticisation of everyday life by reopening to question the taken-for-granted and naturalised concepts, practices, relations and social arrangements through which we relate to ourselves and to others. However, by denaturalising the categories that organise and define our experience, and make us what we are, we enter into a worrying, indeed frightening, space in which we must ‘unthink’ our common sense and recognise as fragile and contingent many of our modernist certainties. In this way, we might begin to recognise that all knowledge is uncertain, that truth is unstably linked to power and that our intelligibility is constantly in question. The task is to eschew certainty in order to become an ironic hero of our own life by ‘tak[ing] oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration’ (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987: 166). We engage in unmaking our selves and what we have become and, thus, at the same time, make intolerable the institutions and experiences within which our intelligibility is constructed. In other words, our subjectivity becomes a site of political struggle (Ball and Olmedo, 2013).

To sum up, what is involved here is a creative and aesthetic politics that is not reliant on the pre-given, tainted, moral principles that we take to define humanity, or which require us to search for and link our essential qualities to inherent abstract principles. Instead, one is set the challenge ‘of creatively and courageously authoring one’s ethical self’ (Foucault, 1977: 154).

[I]t is a question of searching for another kind of critical philosophy. Not a critical philosophy that seeks to determine the conditions and the limits of our possible knowledge of the object, but a critical philosophy that seeks the conditions and indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject, transforming ourselves. (Foucault, 1997: 179)

What is at stake here are the ‘arrangements’ that have created the modern subject. The point is to make these arrangements untenable and unacceptable, and to begin to establish the conditions for the creation of new modes of subjectivity. ‘And in this case, one of the main political problems nowadays would be, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves’ (Foucault, 1997: 213). The question is, then, how might this translate into something we might conceive of as an education?

Education as self-formation

Leask argues that if we take seriously the focus on the practices of education in the later Foucault, then

instead of being rendered into factories of obedient behaviour, schools or colleges can be the locus for a critically informed, oppositional micro-politics. In other words: the power-relations that (quite literally) constitute education can now be regarded, on Foucault’s own terms, as being creative, ‘enabling’ and positive. (Leask, 2011: 57)

That is, we can rethink education in ways that respond to Foucault’s question: ‘How could it be possible to elaborate new kinds of relationships to ourselves?’ (Berkeley Lecture 1 see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0URrVbpjW0>.) (U-Tube) . Indeed, Butin (2006: 371) suggests that there is ‘a seemingly natural affinity between Foucault’s insights – into, for example, power, knowledge, resistance, subjectification – and educational research and practice’, and Leask (2011: 67) argues that, in Foucault’s later work, there are possibilities which indicate that pedagogy can be reconsidered not simply as a technique for the manufacture of imposition, but as ‘the theatre of subject creation, of new “practices of the self”, new kinds of relations – especially via continued resistance to domination’. Leask also suggests that ‘teachers and students alike can now be regarded as creative agents, capable of voluntary and intentional counter-practices’ (67). This is what Infinito (2003a) calls ‘a political pedagogy’. She identifies from Foucault’s essay ‘What is enlightenment?’ three elements of the ‘philosophical ethos’ – that is, three different aspects involved in working on oneself which might be translated into educational practices – although she goes on to say: ‘How these technologies are applied and what they might look like specifically in daily life or in the classroom are important questions that call for further theoretical analysis and practical application’ (165).³

The first is fostering a learning environment that encourages experimentation. Here, the classroom is an ethical space, a political space and a concrete space of freedom. Second, as outlined above, is enabling the development of an awareness of one’s current condition as defined and constructed by the given culture and historical moment. Third, again as outlined

above, is encouraging an attitude of critique with a focus on the production of particular sorts of dispositions that would be valued and fostered, and made explicit (questions of subjectivity) – like scepticism, detachment, outrage, intolerance and tolerance. This would involve facilitating audacity and fearlessness, and valuing ‘difference’ (Olssen, 2009), as the basis of ‘thin’ community. These three are, of course, interlinked. A learning environment that rests on self-formation is a condition for the possibility of refusal and the denaturalisation of subjectivity, power and truth. The ‘classroom’ is reconceived as a space of freedom, the ‘curriculum’ as curiosity, and ‘pedagogy’ as a parrhesiatic encounter.

Spaces of education

As a framework for educational practice, the first precept suggests the need to attend to the form and nature of the spaces of education – the setting, its frames and practices, and its architecture. Self-formation here, in the very immediate sense, requires spaces where our actions as learners are attended to, carefully considered and taken seriously enough to merit a response. This would be a space in which agonism would be valued and failure would be a constructive opportunity to learn and change – both of which take time; the pace of education would need to slow down. In such a space, it would always be possible to ‘start again’, and who one is, what one thinks and what one is committed to would remain tentative, open to revision.⁴ Youdell (2011: 115) suggests that this means ‘intervening in the intolerable present to make “*that-which-is*” no longer “*that-which-is*” inviting us to imagine becomings that disrupt the intolerable ... offering instead moments of the haecceity of “this thing” or “here is”’.⁵ The aim would be to make

the past come undone at the seams, so that it loses its unity, continuity, and naturalness, so that it does not appear any more as a single past that has already been made, but rather, as a heterogeneous array of converging and diverging struggles that are still on going and only have the appearance of having been settled. (Medina, 2011: 16)

In this heterotopic space (and time), we must attend to frameworks of knowability and unknowability, at the same time, always bearing in mind that ignorance is formed by knowledge and vice versa.

Genealogy as curriculum/curriculum as curiosity

Infinito’s (2003a) second condition for a political pedagogy suggests genealogy as curriculum and the centrality of the question of truth. In stark contrast to the modernist classroom, the concern is not with what is true but with the how of truth. Knowledge becomes a problem rather than a content. As Infinito (2003a: 168) suggests: ‘Here, we might imagine a curriculum designed to enable multiple genealogical investigations into many other human constructs and disciplines’. This is what Chokr (2009) calls an ‘unlearning’, which rests on the question of ‘how should we govern ourselves?’ (Chokr 2009: 47). Unlearning ‘should encourage students to think deeply and critically about the illusory world of all the ideas, notions, and beliefs that hem, jostle, whirl, confuse and oppress them’ and ‘requires of them a reversal of standpoint’ (61). This would involve a view of knowledge as games of truth and, in relation to this, ‘the collapse of objective meaning leaving us free to create our own lives and ourselves’ (Wain, 2007: 173). This is a form of ‘combative’ or ‘guerrilla’ pluralism, in which there is no *epistemic*

innocence (Medina, 2011: 30). ‘What the *guerrilla* pluralism of the Foucaultian genealogical method can help produce is *epistemic insurrections* that have to be constantly renewed and remain always ongoing in order to keep producing epistemic friction’ (33).

‘Dislocation’ and ‘decoding’, as Chokr (2009: 62) puts it, are necessary to place ‘in abeyance the propositions and assumptions underlying and governing understanding and behaviour’. To reiterate, this is not an abdication of truth but rather a self-conscious engagement in the games of truth, destabilising truth rather than learning it, historicising excellence and beauty rather than appreciating it – ‘a commitment to uncertainty’ (Youdell, 2011:). This would involve the recovery of subjugated knowledges, thinking ‘tactically about the multiple effects of texts and classroom engagements’, drawing out and making ‘visible subjugated meanings and unsettl[ing] and open[ing] up to troubling those meanings that inscribe the normative’ (Code, 2007: 69). At the same time, we must come to see and understand past subjects differently, by activating counter-memories – that is, a struggle against collective forgetting, particularly in relation to social injustices. This might also involve a focus on the *writerliness* of texts and ‘de-naturalizing our habitual economy of reading’ and ‘the consumerist model of reading’ (Zalloua, 2004: 239). Rather, this is writing and ‘reading as a practical strategy in the constitution of the self’ (234) – two key technologies for the care of the self.

This is a classroom in which the aim is to cultivate an orientation of curiosity:

a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way ... a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental. (Foucault, 1980: 328)⁶

However, this is ‘not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that enables one to get free of oneself’ (Foucault, 1988b: 8). It relies on ‘the knower’s straying afield of himself’ (Foucault 1992: 42). Curiosity is one means of loosening our relation to a fixed identity, creating the possibility of erring, of ‘no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think’ (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987: 47). ‘Curiosity is indeed what enables the student (the curious subject *par excellence*) to resist the powerful lure of ideological complacency’ and to challenge and disrupt ‘the economy of the Same’ (Zalloua, 2004: 239, 242).

A disposition of critique

The third task and dimension of a political pedagogy is the cultivation of an attitude or disposition to critique, in relation to which there are certain qualities of character, like courage (Foucault, 2011), which might be formed and needed, not as abstract or self-managing techniques, as currently intended by so-called ‘character education’ (Dishon and Goodman, 2017), but as the basis for action and interaction in spaces of learning. However, Infinito (2003a: 170) warns: ‘Lest we think this a radical notion, we must remember that education is practiced at producing desirable dispositions. A history of the hidden curriculum reveals specific attitudes infusing education at various times, deemed part of its responsibility’. The point here would be to encourage ethical teachers and learners who have a healthy suspicion of the present but who are also able to acknowledge their own fallibility – that is, ‘teachers’ and learners who are open to infinite possibilities for change and are willing to critique their own commitments. This would mean adopting a critical stance that oscillates between attempts to recreate ourselves and the world, and in doing so ‘make ourselves vulnerable to the past’, and ‘open ourselves up to interrogation’ (Medina, 2011: 28, 29).

The 'learning' processes involved here may be part of what Zembylas (2015: 163) and others call a 'pedagogy of discomfort', drawing on what Foucault (2000) termed 'the ethic of discomfort'. Students and teachers are challenged to embrace their vulnerability and accept the ambiguity of self and their dependence on others (Zembylas, 2015: 170), and are constantly "jarred" from their habitual everydayness' (Chokr, 2009: 63). Teaching/learning thus becomes a series of crises, disruptions and impasses. Part of the pedagogical challenge for the 'teacher' is to create a social and ethical environment within which discomfort is productive. As Felman argues:

If teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerable unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught ... I therefore think that my job as a teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand. (Felman, 1992: 53)

Infinito (2003b: 75) discusses this in an explanation of the use of the 'Blue-eyed-brown-eyed' classroom event, and writes of a 'struggle with the propriety of subjecting students unknowingly to ridicule and discomfort. At the same time, perhaps the most profound education is always discomforting'. The point is to create a space within which it is possible to begin to confront and re-imagine the historically sedimented questions and problem(at)isations through which we address the world – that is, a curriculum within which we can reconstitute our present, opening up 'a room, understood as a room of concrete freedom, that is possible transformation' (Foucault, 1972: 5) . Conceived and practised in this way, education becomes an exploration and mapping of limits, and testing and crossing them when possible, a set of multiple transgressions that allows 'individuals to peer over the edge of their limits, but also confirms the impossibility of removing them' (Allan, 1999: 48) – that is, a sequence of moments, openings or spaces in which unlearning is possible, an exploration of ethical heterotopias, real and unreal, where difference is affirmed, 'a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live' (Foucault, 1984). In relation to this, first and foremost, students must be recognised as ethical beings capable of reflection, decision-making and responsibility for their identity and their social relations. That is to say, 'ethical self formation as moral pedagogy allows for the maintenance and production of the learners' freedom' (Infinito, 2003b: 68). In a similar way, Sicilia-Camacho and Fernández-Balboa (2009: 458) recast critical pedagogy in Foucauldian terms and assert that: 'Our version of CP [critical pedagogy] seeks the construction of personal-pedagogical-political ethics while acknowledging the legitimacy of different "pedagogical games" and "regimes of truth"'.⁷ In these ways, education and pedagogy are articulated not as bundles of skills and knowledges, but as the formation of moral subjectivity, a form of practical politics, a struggle to become self-governing. This is not liberation but activation, an enduring engagement in the travails and failures of self-fashioning, experimenting with and choosing what we might be and how we might relate to others. It is ethics as a 'social praxis', experiments with 'forms, modes and styles of life' (Infinito, 2003b: 74)), and new social and political forms. It is driven by failure and the need to 'fail again' but better, rather than the expectation of success or closure. It values the pluralisation and agonism of voices and contestation over consensus and resolution. It recognises that solutions give rise to new problems and rests on what Wenham (2013) calls 'the tragic view of the world', according to which conflict, suffering and strife are inevitable phenomena of social and political life, and may never be ultimately overcome.

Teaching here becomes a process of asking questions without providing answers; the goal is to explore 'to what extent it might be possible to think differently (*penser autrement*)' (Foucault, 1992: 9). It is education as epistemological suspicion. Education and unlearning become both enabling and destructive, and 'what is at stake is the production of a certain kind of experience, a reconfiguring of experience itself' (Geuss, 2008: 9). This is different from critical pedagogy; this is 'a morality *as action*, recognizing individual's capacity to develop alternative "subjectivities" and make appropriate decisions', as distinct from critical pedagogy as a 'moral process whose goal is the emancipation of others' (Sicilia-Camacho and Fernández-Balboa, 2009: 458). The problem of the teacher is that '[o]ne always needs the help of others in the soul's labour upon itself' (Foucault, 1997: 218).

All of this, as Youdell (2011: 11) aptly puts it, is 'fraught' and begs difficult questions about what a learner and a teacher (guide or mentor) are. Foucault sees no objection to 'those who know more in a given game of truth' telling another 'what he must do, teach him'; the problem in this relationship and interaction is 'to avoid the effects of dominance' (Foucault, 1988a: 16-17), in relation to which Biesta (2013) usefully distinguishes between 'learning from' and 'being taught by'. There is a mutuality to the relations of power here and, in 'Self-writing', Foucault (n.d.) quotes Seneca, saying: 'The process is mutual; for men learn while they teach'. The bond between master and disciple, as Foucault puts it, is always provisional and circumstantial, a dialogue based on respect and mutual care, and mutual development, a relationship that is open to constant scrutiny and revision. The teacher here is a 'genuine interlocutor', someone who takes risks and relishes challenges in order to create a public space where fearless speech is encouraged. All of this must rest on the relationship, for the teacher as much as the student, between care of the self and the care of others. As Foucault (1990: 89) points out in his survey of Greek political thought, there is a fundamental relation between governing others and governing the self: 'One will not be able to rule if one is not oneself ruled'. The exercise of political power demands the practice and cultivation of personal virtues. 'It is the power over self which will regulate the power over others ... if you care for yourself correctly i.e., if you know ontologically what you are ... then you cannot abuse your power over others' (Foucault, 1988a: 8). This can be transposed into the problem of pedagogical power and would re-envision teaching as an ethical practice, and would mean constructing one's relation to the learner differently, with a primary focus on attending to and facilitating their impulse of curiosity and making the classroom a site of 'ethico-aesthetic self-fashioning' (Zalloua, 2004: 244), organised and reorganised in relation to the problem of 'What kind of self am I going to be?' As Foucault (1997: 300) remarks, in order to care for the self, one needs a 'master of care', a guide, a counsellor, a friend, and he counsels the need to offset 'the dangers of solitude'. As Olssen (2007: 207) makes clear: 'Ethical action is not, for Foucault, an individual affair but presupposes a certain political and social structure with respect to liberty'. Self-formation is not a lonely narcissism but is only possible within what Falzon (1998) calls 'the fundamental encounter with the other' (36), within which 'our narcissistic reveries are shattered, the circle of our solipsism is burst' (34). Here, the life we live among other subjects, as Infinito (2003a: 160) puts it, is 'the stuff of ethics' – it is the fashioning of 'a mode of being which emerges from our own history and thinking'. Clearly, refusing to be a 'proper' teacher means that the teacher is also vulnerable in the 'classroom', putting their subjectivity at risk. As Deacon (2006: 184) points out, practices of liberty in the classroom 'are inextricably intertwined with pedagogical effects of guilt, obligation and verification, and assumptions about degrees of ignorance, dependence on others,

legitimate compulsion and achievement'. Here, teaching and learning are a set of experiments that are both exciting and frightening, based on the 'parrhesiatic contract', in which both parties speak frankly (Peters, 2003). The teacher has 'the task of establishing a vital, vibrant public space for truth-telling to occur' (Pignatelli, 2002: 174). This is necessarily a very 'concrete, palpable experience' (Falzon, 1998: 33); it is 'the art of living dangerously' (Allan, 1999: 58). Emotions, intellectual risks and trust become intermingled in complex and difficult ways. Nonetheless, in these ways, teaching might become a site of 'delight in oneself' (Foucault, 1990: 65).

In ancient Greek politics, the ability to govern was not defined 'as if it were a question of a "profession" with its particular skills and techniques' (Foucault, 1990: 91) – which is how we have come to conceive of the work of the teacher – but rather depended on ethical work of the self on the self – that is, the work of self-formation. The point is not to 'accept' but to experiment, to create, to think critically, to imagine, to make judgments about what it is we do not want to be and what it is we might want to be. This is both negative (a disavowal of the contingently normal) and positive (thinking differently about ourselves) – a transgression, a struggle that produces us as ethical beings, a disposition towards and constant activity of changing, and an unending search for autonomy. The self becomes 'autonomous' only through 'concrete possibilities which present themselves as invitations for the practice of liberty' (Bemauer and Rasmussen, 1994: 71).

From here to there?

All of this begs many questions about how we get from where we are now – wedded to an education system that is absurd (Ball, 2018) and divisive, and conflates education with schooling – to the possibility of education as something different. How do we move from an 'education' that rests on an assumption of ignorance and a reverence to the past, and that can only function through practices of exclusion and humiliation, to a form of education that eschews systems altogether and offers no privilege to the past and rather consists of a process of creative self-fashioning, the opening up of vulnerability, unruly curiosity and frank speaking – a space of education that is not defined and limited by an institutional rationale, but is part of and related to forms of self-fashioning carried out elsewhere, and to the broader life of the citizen, in a 'constant effort to expand the scope of new modes of subjectivity, by creating the space for the flourishing of a multiplicity of arts of living' (Milchman and Rosenberg, 2011: 12)? What I can offer are some incitements towards 'the critique of what we are and experiments with the possibility of going beyond', which combines outrage with limit-testing and careful scholarship, and cultivates 'the art of voluntary insubordination, and a practice of reflective intractability' (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987: 108, 32).

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to Patrick Bailey, Matthew Clarke, Donald Gillies and Carolina Junemann for their careful, insightful and very constructive comments on earlier versions of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Stephen J Ball  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7446-4201>

Notes

1. Foucault (2010: 3) himself refers to this early, middle, late periodisation, or rather signals the changing emphases in his analyses from knowledge to power to subjectivity – that is, ‘studying each of these three areas in turn’ (4) – as moving from a focus on *forms of knowledge* to *the matrix of forms of behaviour* to *the constitution of the subject’s modes of being*.
2. As Tavani (2013) argues, this involves a reading of the myriads of intermediate spaces hosted between the two poles of confirmation or subversion (see also Foucault, 2006).
3. One of many such developments would be to consider how self-formation might relate to primary and secondary schooling, unless, of course, such a division is rendered redundant by the work of critique, as I think it might be. More challenging might be whether self-formation should be thought about in relation to developmental stages and, for example, Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development. Again, we might want to take such a conception of the child subject as needing to be dispensed with entirely.
4. Perhaps we have also to give up on linearity, the developmentalist conception of education.
5. This denotes the discrete qualities, properties or characteristics of a thing that make it a *particular* thing.
6. Mahmood (2011) extols the virtues of curiosity in a recent article on the role of Standard Attainment Tests in English education.
7. There is further work to be done here in teasing out the important differences between Foucault’s self-formation and more familiar versions of critical pedagogy. Biesta (2017) is a helpful resource in this task.

References

- Allan J (1999) *Actively Seeking Inclusion: Pupils with Special Needs in Mainstream Schools*. London: Falmer Press.
- Ball SJ (2018) The tragedy of state education in England: Reluctance, compromise and muddle – a system in disarray. *Journal of the British Academy* 6: 207–238.
- Ball SJ and Olmedo A (2013) Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities. *Critical Studies in Education* 54(1): 85–96.
- Batters S (2011) Care of the self and the will to freedom: Michel Foucault, critique and ethics. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1241&context=srhonorsprog>
- Bemaier JW and Rasmussen D (1994) *The Final Foucault*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Biesta GJJ (2013) *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Biesta GJJ (2017) Don’t be fooled by ignorant schoolmasters: On the role of the teacher in emancipatory education. *Policy Futures in Education* 15(1): 52–73.
- Butin D (2001) If this is resistance I would hate to see domination: Retrieving Foucault’s notion of resistance within educational research. *Educational Studies* 32(2): 157–176.
- Butin D (2006) Putting Foucault to work in educational research. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 40(3): 371–380.
- Carroll D (1982) Disruptive discourse and critical power: The conditions of archaeology and genealogy. *Humanities in Society* 5(3–4): 175–200

- Chokr NN (2009) *Unlearning: Or How Not to Be Governed?* Charlottesville, VA: Societas.
- Code L (2007) The power of ignorance. In: Sullivan S and Tuana N (eds) *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 213–229.
- Davidson A (2001) In praise of counter-conduct. *History of the Human Sciences* 24(4): 25–41.
- Deacon R (2006) Michel Foucault on education: a preliminary theoretical overview. *South African Journal of Education* 26(2): 177–187.
- Deleuze G and Guattari F (1991) *What is Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dishon G and Goodman JF (2017) No-excuses for character: A critique of character education in no-excuses charter schools. *Theory and Research in Education* 15(2): 182–201.
- Falzone C (1998) *Foucault and Social Dialogue: beyond fragmentation*. London: Routledge.
- Felman S (1992) Education and crisis, or the vicissitudes of teaching. In: Felman S and Laub D (eds) *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1–56.
- Foucault M (n.d.) Self-writing. Available at: itsy.co.uk/archive/sisn/Pos/green/Foucault.doc (accessed 17 May 2012).
- Foucault M (1971) Orders of discourse. *Social Science Information* 10(2): 7–30.
- Foucault M (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault M (1977) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault M (1979) *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault M (1980) Governmentality. In: Rabinow P and Rose N (eds) *The Essential Foucault: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*. New York: Free Press, pp.229–252.
- Foucault M (1983) On the genealogy of ethics: An overview of work in progress. In: Dreyfus H and Rabinow P (eds) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 841–869.
- Foucault M (1984) Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias. Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>
- Foucault M (1988a) The ethic of the care for the self as a practice of freedom (interview). In: Bernauer J and Rasmussen D (eds) *The Final Foucault*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1–20.
- Foucault M (1988b) The masked philosopher. In: Kritzman LD (ed.) *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*. New York: Routledge, pp. 228–237.
- Foucault M (1990) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault M (1992) *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault M (1997) What is critique? Trans. Hochroth L. In: Lotringer S and Hochroth L (eds) *The Politics of Truth*. New York: Semiotext(e), pp. 41–83.
- Foucault M (1997) *Self Writing in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York, The New Press, pp. 207–221.
- Foucault M (2000) *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984, Volume 3: Power*. Ed. Faubion JD. New York: Free Press.
- Foucault M (2006) *The History of Madness*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault M (2010) *The Government of the Self and others: Lectures at the College de France 1982–1983*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Foucault M (2011) *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–84* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault M (2016) *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Geuss R (2008) *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Infinito J (2003a) Ethical self-formation: A look at the later Foucault. *Educational Theory* 53(2): 155–171.
- Infinito J (2003b) Jane Elliot meets Foucault: The formation of ethical identities in the classroom. *Journal of Moral Education* 32(1): 67–76.

- Kohlberg L (1981) *Essays on Moral Development, Volume 1: The Philosophy of Moral Development*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Lazzarato M (2009) Neoliberalism in action: Inequality, insecurity and *the reconstitution of the social*. *Theory, Culture and Society* 26(6): 109–133.
- Leask I (2011) Beyond subjection: Notes on the later Foucault and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44(1): 57–73.
- McNay L (2013) *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*. Cambridge: Wiley.
- Mahmood S (2011) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mahon M (1992) *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power and the Subject*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Martin LH, Gutman H and Hutton PH (eds) (1988) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock.
- Meade RR (2014) Foucault's concept of counter-conduct and the politics of anti-austerity protest in Ireland. *Concept* 5(3): 1–13.
- Medina J (2011) Toward a Foucauldian epistemology of resistance: Counter-memory, epistemic friction and guerrilla pluralism. *Foucault Studies* 12(1): 9–35.
- Milchman A and Rosenberg A (2011) Michel Foucault: An ethical politics of care of the self and others. In: Zuckert CH (ed.) *Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Authors and Arguments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.228–237.
- Oksala J (2005) *Foucault on Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olssen M (2007) Invoking Democracy: Foucault's conception (with insights from Hobbes). In M. A. Peters and A. C. Besley (Eds.) *Why Foucault? new directions in educational research*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Olssen M (2009) *Toward a Global Thin Community: Nietzsche, Foucault and the Cosmopolitan Commitment*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Peters M (2003) Truth-telling as an educational practice of the self: Foucault, parrhesia and the ethics of subjectivity. *Oxford Review of Education* 29(2): 207–224.
- Pignatelli F (1993) What can I do? Foucault on freedom and the question of teacher agency. *Educational Theory* 43(4): 411–432.
- Pignatelli F (2002) Mapping the Terrain of Foucauldian Ethics: A Response to the Surveillance of Schooling. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21(1): 157–180.
- Rabinow P (ed.) (1987) *The Foucault Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Scheurich J and Bell McKenzie K (2005) Foucault's methodologies: Archaeology and genealogy. In: Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 864–889.
- Sicilia-Camacho A and Fernandez-Balboa JM (2009) Reflecting on the moral bases of critical pedagogy in PETE: toward a Foucaultian perspective on ethics and the care of the self. *Sport, Education and Society* 14(4): 443–463.
- Tamboukou M (2006) Educational heterotopias and the self. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 12(3): 399–414.
- Tavani E (2013) Hannah Arendt: Aesthetics and politics of appearance. *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 5: 466–475.
- Wain K (2007) Foucault: the ethics of self-creation and the future of education. In Peters M and Belsey T (Eds.) *Why Foucault? New directions in educational research*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Wenham M (2013). *The Tragic View of the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Youldell D (2011) *School Trouble: Identity, Power and Politics in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Zalloua Z (2004) Foucault as educator: The question of technology and learning how to read differently. *Symploke* 12(1–2): 232–247.
- Zembylas M (2015) 'Pedagogy of discomfort' and its ethical implications: The tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education* 10(2): 163–174.