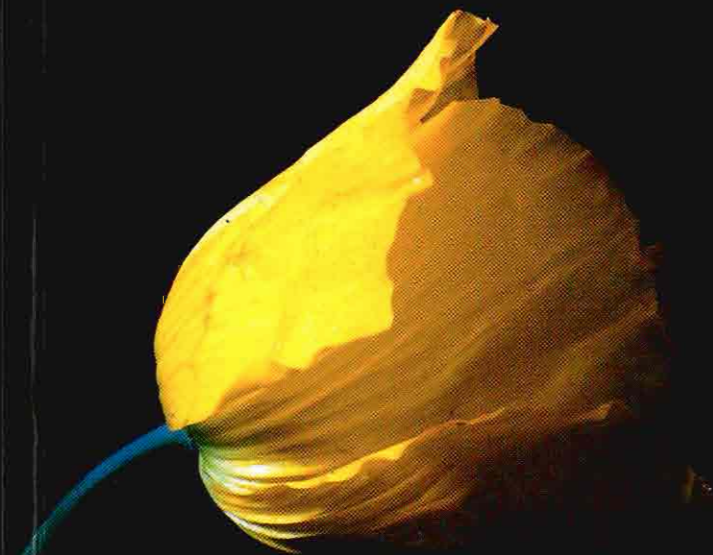


Conversations

Luce
Irigaray



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with

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New Challenges in Education

Conversation between

Luce Irigaray and Michael Worton

Michael Worton: For several years, we have been discussing a variety of issues, and especially in recent years we have been thinking about the place and role of education in the contemporary and globalized world. Our collaborative work began in 1999 when I was translating Luce Irigaray's article 'Beyond All Judgement, You Are', published that year in the *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*. This led later to such partnership work as, in 2003, the bringing to University College London of the exhibition of 'Chi sono io? Chi sei tu?' (*Who am I? Who are You?*), an exhibition of Italian children's words and drawings with a commentary by Luce Irigaray, and our public discussions about the role of universities on occasion of the Irigaray's talk 'Listening, Thinking, Teaching' during the conference 'In All the World We Are Always Only Two' organized around her work in June 2006, at the University Park of Nottingham. The conversation below is the beginning of a longer collaborative project on education for global citizenship in the modern world.

* * *

MICHAEL WORTON: One of the major challenges facing school education is how to make the teaching of 'citizenship' interesting and relevant to young people. How do you envisage including the raising awareness of the nature and importance of otherness/difference?

LUCE IRIGARAY: In my opinion, the teaching of citizenship cannot remain at the level of a moralistic discourse, as is too often the case. I have often encountered the failure of such teaching with pupils of different ages. For example, in one otherwise very progressive school in Italy, children had been taught to respect foreigners but not the people who were close to them. I therefore heard such statements from the children as: 'I must respect all people, even blacks and Chinese people', but 'I hate my female class-mate' or 'The girls in my class are really stupid'. The moralistic discourse about a citizenship respectful towards otherness has been an abstract, and, one might say, an ideological teaching that has not opened up practical ways of meeting and coexisting in difference, especially with those closest to us. Now, if we cannot recognize, and respect, the otherness of our partner in love, we will not be able to coexist in difference with someone who has another skin colour. It is the education of our instincts, and first of all of our sexual instincts, which allows us to share or not, with every body that is animated by human desire. If we succeed in transforming our instincts into desire, we shall lay the foundations for universal coexistence. There then remains the task of cultivating our desire. We have not – or have not yet – achieved a universal culture of desire, and, in any case, this could not be universal in a neutral or neuter way. We must thus consider and take into account the manner in which instincts and desire have been integrated and organized in each culture. Coexisting with a black person ought to be a question of coexistence between different cultures rather than between different skin colours.

Coexistence between different cultures begins with coexisting with our sexual partner. It is there that coexistence first has to take place and must be taught to young people, in order to prepare them for a global coexistence. As you could observe, coexisting needs to respect both natural belonging and cultural belonging. Perhaps the best way to lead young people to a citizenship which is truly respectful of nature and otherness is to make them aware of themselves and of the other(s) as being both nature and culture. We are natural beings and must live in a natural environment to remain living beings, but our living belonging has to be cultivated in order to coexist in difference with another living being.

M.W.: In your recent work, you increasingly adopt a global perspective. Could you outline what you understand by 'global citizenship' and the role that education can play in fostering this in young people?

L.I.: To build a global citizenship requires us to return to what we share as humans. More and more, we have moved away from our human belonging. We must depart again from it to elaborate a culture which can be shared by all human beings, avoiding all forms of imperialism or further exploitation of humans as such.

Any global citizenship must correspond to our human nature, a nature which is the same for all the human beings on our planet, but one which includes difference within itself: we are man or woman. Men and women need a culture which is appropriate to their own natural belonging. The first component of this culture consists of civil rights, or at least civil rules of coexistence. To emerge from a natural state and coexist as citizens, we must be able to contain our natural instincts or feelings in order to reach a civil behaviour regulated by duties with respect to coexistence. Indeed, such a coexistence could be global if it were based on our nature. If this is not the case, it is because humankind either still remains in a natural state or has lost its natural belonging in an artificial cultural or civic construction, for example, comparing man and woman to a neuter or neutral citizen. In this way, we can no longer coexist as citizens or lay persons at a global level.

In my view, it would be possible to include such considerations in school education. It would be desirable to illustrate them with examples drawn from the culture to which the students belong and from other cultures. This would clarify for pupils both the cause and the nature of the difficulties which we encounter in the elaboration of a global citizenship and would offer ways of overcoming them. It would also be useful to teach them some of the other elements which intervene in the construction of the manner of coexisting in community: key moments in the history of the development of humanity and the role of climate, of geographic context, of natural resources, of the intermingling of civilizations and so on. And it would be advisable to explain how these elements can have the potential to cancel out our fundamental belonging to humankind through secondary differences.

Furthermore, it would be fruitful to teach students the dynamic and beneficial aspects of meeting in difference without ever abandoning our fundamental sharing in humankind as women and men. It is possible to make clear to pupils that to stop at one single mode of citizenship or culture is often the result of an inability to go beyond our own habits and customs, an inability which paralyzes both our culture and our own lives

and prevents us from taking forward the becoming of humankind, and, especially, our own individual becoming.

M.W.: In 'Towards a sharing of speech' you state that sexual difference is 'the most universal difference, and the one that most profoundly unites nature and culture' (*Key Writings*, p. 84). Could you elaborate on the second clause here and how sexual difference *unites* nature and culture?

L.I.: First of all, I would like to stress that, more and more, I use the term 'sexuate', rather than 'sexual', in order to avoid the all too frequent confusion between sexuate identity and sexual choice. Sexuate identity is more basic and it is more determined by birth than sexual choice. It is determined by both the morphology of the body and the relational environment which goes with this body. So, sexuate identity is the same, or not, as that of the mother; it implies making love either inside or outside one's own body and with a specific relationship with mucous and engendering; it presupposes the possibility or not of engendering within one's self and of engendering or not the same and/or the different within one's self; and it entails a different confrontation with the mystery of one's own origin and so on. Now, all of these bodily properties need an appropriate development and an appropriate culture with regard to one's own becoming and the way in which one relates to and with the other.

Such development and culture are to a great extent still lacking, but in one way or another the necessity of building a fundamental bridge between nature and culture exists in all traditions and cultures. This can be deciphered through the way in which they have been constructed, especially at the level of genealogy and marriages, and also through a lack of or an inappropriate regulation in the weaving of relationships. In any case, the fact that sexuate identity is both connected to the body and a relational context ensures that it is from the beginning both nature and culture, a culture that is, or not, appropriate to one's own nature and that thereby favours or prevents the growth and blossoming of this nature.

Culture cannot be universal in a neutral and undifferentiated way. I know that such universality seems to be the goal that we must reach, especially if we are to succeed in achieving globalization. However, such a conception amounts to an unconscious or cynical cultural imperialism, which causes the loss of cultural identity and chaos, as well as deadly conflicts and wars. The fact that our cultures have leapt over the cultivation

and culture of our sexuate identity is probably the root cause of most religious wars, especially those between the monotheistic faiths. We could interpret original sin in this way: the first human couple in our tradition strove to become similar to God instead of, or before, sharing with the sexual human partner. We then enter a sort of madness and exile that has prevented us from moving forward to our human blossoming and a universal sharing.

M.W.: There are many debates about when it is best to teach sex education to young people. However, whatever the decision regarding the timing, whether it be in primary or secondary school, there is rarely a sense of sex education being an ongoing thread throughout education on into further and higher education, even although there are issues arriving at all stages of life. How would you propose organizing the curriculum in this domain?

L.I.: Frequently, sex education is restricted to giving information about sexual organs as the organs of reproduction. This kind of teaching is inspired by the worst interpretation of sexuality in our culture. Furthermore, it damages the sensibility of young people for whom sexuality longs to enter into a relationship instead of acquiring a detailed knowledge of anatomy. I could give many examples about the shame that such education brings to adolescents.

I think that sex education ought to start with desire and love, explaining to the children that desire and love search for intimacy, notably through amorous embraces. It is easy to make this clear to children as well as to adolescents and adults. We must provide them with words and gestures to help them to express their desire for intimacy. If such words and gestures – which correspond to a culture of desire and love – are missing, only violence will be used to enter into sexual relations.

At each stage of the curriculum, it is possible to propose little exercises that aim to cultivate desire and love. The purpose of these is to lead each child to an awareness of his or her own identity and of the difference(s) of this identity with regard to that of the other(s). This can be realized through performing sentences including words such as 'I . . . you', 'I . . . her', 'I . . . him', 'us', 'to love', 'to desire', 'to share', 'with', 'together' and so on. After the sentences have been composed by each pupil, the group reflects on the results and becomes aware of the difference(s) between individuals. It would seem that sexuate difference is the most fundamental difference at

the level of syntactic structures and even at the level of the choice of terms, times, spaces and so on. After developing awareness of difference(s), it is appropriate to teach young people how to meet and to share in difference. This too can be realized through linguistic exercises, such as making a written or oral proposal to a friend of the other sex, inviting them to share an activity that can appeal to both parties, or even to invent a dialogue between the two. It is also possible to resort to drawing or drama in order to learn how to meet and share in difference. This can be done at all stages of the curriculum and please people of all ages. I have tried this out in Italy with children, adolescents and also adults, for example, parents or teachers. However, some teachers did not enjoy taking part in such training, because they had been educated to favour so-called neutral behaviour and discourse as a sign of culture. They themselves had been subjected to such teaching in and through 'neutrality' and could not – or did not want to – give it up.

A further point: it is desirable to alternate exercises of sharing in difference with exercises of sharing in sameness in order to train children to have respect for either the same or the other in relation to one's self and to discover the ways in which to achieve this.

M.W.: How would you envisage the curriculum developing in the light of your own thinking of what it is important to include in the curriculum? Or is the notion of the curriculum itself something that you seek to review? If so, could you explain how?

L.I.: I think that the current curriculum lacks training in relational behaviour – with respect to one's self, to the world, to the other. Children are taught as if they were little robots, removed from their relational context. The present curriculum considers things that must be taught, rather than the individuals who are to be educated. Now, an individual is always living in a relational environment and a peculiar world which need to be taken into consideration, and not only by means of a type of instruction that speaks solely to the mind but, rather, through a formation that addresses the whole being in order to lead it gradually from a sensible and particular immediacy to a holistic and general concern. Our current way of teaching results in a split between body and mind within the individual that does not allow the development of the whole being. And this brings about the separation between private life and public life, between natural state and

cultured state, and, more generally, it results in a way of relating to and with the other that is either instinctive or abstract, and remains subjected to realities that are already existing and are external to the relationship itself. The individual is somehow lost between these two polarities and can no longer relate to his or her own self, to the world, and to the other in a manner that is both natural and cultivated.

The curriculum ought to consider the pupil or student at each stage of his or her growth and development and provide everyone with a form of education and culture that is appropriate. For example, according to our age, we experience different needs and aspirations with regard to our relations to the self, to the other and to the world. Usually, it is only the degree of competence that is taken into account. Education develops efficiency through competitiveness and segregation. People are led to renounce their relational desire in order to become the best in the group. Education is thus rather similar to a war in which the key question is: how to overcome the other(s), the world and even one's own self?

Another point: our educational system is still based on the requirements of a masculine subjectivity that needs objects, relationships to and with those who are similar, in a group rather than between two individuals; the relationships are also to be vertical and hierarchical more than horizontal and sharing, above all when it is a question of difference. These aspects correspond to the conditions necessary for a man to emerge from the natural and maternal world. They do not yet permit feminine subjectivity to accomplish its own becoming. Indeed they do not correspond to those tendencies that are favoured by feminine subjectivity: relations in two with another subject, a subject who is different and who is generally met in a horizontal, and not a vertical or genealogical, way. The values that are privileged by the feminine subject must enter the educational system as well as the means of meeting in difference.

The diversity of cultures ought also to have a place in the curriculum, not simply to satisfy a mind's curiosity, an interest that is somehow a form of folklore or international tourism, but as an exploration of the various paths that humans can take in order to achieve themselves. The multiplicity of cultures must teach us humility with respect to our own culture, and how to listen to others and meet with them in difference. In my opinion, it is important both to open up to difference between cultures and to discover the basic paradigms upon which each culture is built. Sexuate difference is certainly one of the most crucial paradigms which play a part in the

construction of all cultures. For this very reason, sexuate difference must have a decisive role in education.

M.W.: In all countries, one of the major problems is the gap between primary and secondary education and the gap between secondary education and tertiary education. How can our governments and/or schools, colleges and universities bridge these gaps and create a seamless learning and teaching environment?

L.I.: When reading your question, I asked myself: 'Why does a gap exist?' 'What is responsible for this gap?' 'Would a gap exist if education was centred on pupils and not on the subjects or matters to be taught?' On further reflection, I also thought that the gap between nursery, or kindergarten, education and primary education seems much smaller, and, in fact, you do not refer to a gap between these two phases of education. Now, at nursery school one begins to teach what will be taught later in primary school, and this teaching is interwoven with times of play. Perhaps, with regard to subjects to be taught, one could cancel or narrow the gap by teaching some texts at all stages of the curriculum from different perspectives according to the ages of the pupils. It might also be useful to maintain playtimes throughout the curriculum, not only as breaks between lessons, but as in themselves forms of teaching. And these playtimes should be of greater profit if they would favour relational games, especially in difference. Some examples might help here. When I was working on sexuate education in Italy, I changed some sports lessons into playing together in difference. The tensions resulting from a traditional teaching about sports performance and competitiveness were transformed into a joyful relational energy that provided another sort of teaching, a teaching that could evolve depending on the pupils' own initiatives and according to their different age groups. The same happened in drawing classes and, more generally, in artistic education classes. One could envisage dedicating some times of the week to playing together – with appropriate physical space being made available for this.

To ensure a continuum in education, it should also be possible to plan some relational activities or even classes, in which younger pupils mix with older ones who can supply tutoring aid and help to go from one stage to another of the curriculum. I think that the gap largely results from the fact that the weaving together of relationships by a child in primary school is

not continued in secondary school or in other transitions between the stages of the curriculum. And this creates an important difficulty, and even a dereliction, on the part of children who are already moving on to another place and meeting with new subjects to study. I shall continue to reflect on this interesting point.

M.W.: Given that young people are now 'digital babies', in the sense that they grow up using computers, mobile phones, iPods and so on from a very early age, do we need to change the ways in which we teach? If so, how?

L.I.: How will the being and growth of young children be altered by the fact that they more use their fingers from an early age? What change will be brought about by the fact that, very early, children learn something about distance communication by seeing their parents and close acquaintances talking to and exchanging with people who are not present, and then themselves entering into this way of communicating? On the one hand, a part of the body is now more involved than hitherto, but another part is, on the contrary, less engaged. Humanity will become deeply changed by the use of these new technologies. It is often argued that we are moving onwards to ever better communication between us, but I am not wholly certain that this is indeed the case. Perhaps information will circulate more and more quickly, but the exchange of information does not yet amount to interpersonal communication. And it could happen that information becomes itself our current 'object' and that, by being at the service of information, language loses its most human property: being the means to exchange between subjects. Animals, perhaps, are capable of perceiving and processing information better than us, but they do not seem capable of exchanging in difference, unless it is with the aim of copulating. Often this is the case too with human beings, but we can and should do better.

In any case, it is important to recognize that computers, mobile phones and iPods are substituting themselves for communication between us in our physical presence. And it is necessary to counter their expansion by developing relationships between us. Today, many people talk and listen to their computer more than they do with another human being. It should be advisable to include in the curriculum training in dialogue between people, and to draw the pupils' attention to the differences between engaging in conversation with physical presence and doing the same without such presence. It is true that our culture is built on the exploitation, and even the

oblivion, of our bodily belonging. Attending to an education of our sensory perceptions would be a good way of counterbalancing the power of technology: our sensory perceptions in the relationships to and with nature, and to and with the other(s). It would also be useful to become aware of the plurality of our perceptions and of the part of invisibility that we must respect in our relations with all living beings, especially, although not only, with human beings.

The reign of technology is based on a logic that aims to reduce living beings to inanimate things, objects, words or concepts that man can master – notably through the *techne* that is *logos* – in order to construct a world parallel to the living and changing world. We must return to our living belonging and take into consideration this belonging, and that of all other living beings, in order to elaborate a culture of life rather than one of death. To give a single example: life does not obey the same rhythms as technology. Life is richer and more complex in its blossoming than technology, which prefers speed, and abstract and fictitious potentialities, a choice that is explained and has been programmed by our Western logic since its very beginning. It is a little disquieting to learn today about the virtual possibilities of technology that attract us outside of ourselves without our questioning the ways in which these virtual possibilities are dependent on our own real possibilities and the means of making them blossom in ourselves and between us as human beings. Education ought to reflect on all of these issues and to develop strategies to counter the subjection of our life and of our entire subjectivity to technology.

M.W.: The internet has great democratizing power in that it makes vast amounts of information freely available. However, much of the information is not validated by any authority, so there is the danger that young people may acquire false information. How can we instil skepticism as well as enthusiasm in teaching via the internet?

L.I.: The internet has a tremendous potential for disseminating information. Before deciding on its democratic power, we should interrogate the nature of the information that is spread. The question, in my opinion, is not only whether information is true or false. This is undoubtedly a real issue, but it seems secondary with respect to that of the origin of information. For example: what culture has input information into programmes and in what language? If one single culture or language is privileged, how can we talk

about any democratizing power? Information is already in thrall to political, financial and cultural powers that provide people with the keys to have access to them. How can this be democratic at a global level? Of course, knowing something about these keys also opens up means of opposing to these powers. But who can actually make such a choice, which presupposes the ability to go against the power of money? Will the internet contribute to liberating humanity or to submitting it to some global programme(s) which is, or are, defined and disseminated by certain powers, notably financial powers? And what counter-power can we oppose to this?

One of the greatest dangers that the internet poses is that of the creation of a global opinion, a sort of global cultural and political correctness, through programmes managed by shrewd politicians. In this way, a sort of totalitarianism could be imposed without anyone appearing to be responsible for it: a mere conformism to information spread via the internet would be sufficient. If the internet can open up many people to the complexity of the world, it nonetheless represents the means of manipulating these same people. And the question is not only one of true or false information – in any case who is actually still capable of deciding on this? – but that of the context and the interpretation with which people are provided. In other words, what frames and ways of understanding are determined by the information that is passed on.

Another important point to be considered is the type of encoding, one could say the logic, that is used to communicate information. Not all people are 'compatible' with every sort of presentation and reading of information. The internet can become a new way of colonizing other cultures. The best function of the internet would be to teach differences between cultures and ways of dealing with these differences in order to approach a global democratic culture. What cultural paradigms must be discovered and maintained at a global level? Here we confront the questions: 'What or who is a human being?' 'What is humanity as such?' 'How can we pursue becoming of humanity and make it blossom in our times?'

Furthermore, what will happen to the cultural world, if humanity is considered as two, with a specific culture for each one of these two? Will not this offer the chance of a global democracy? How can we make our way towards it, including via the internet? In fact, the internet can force us to change our conception of education, notably because of an exaggeration of the problematic characteristics of our current system. The internet favours

the accumulation of knowledge and know-how without envisaging any modification in the human being that would allow integration of these new data into a comprehensive subjectivity. It is through dialogue(s) with qualitative difference(s) in mind that human subjectivity can reach a new oneness, which is more relational but not deprived of unity.

M.W.: To what extent is education bound up with notions of democracy, however revitalized conceptions of democracy might be?

L.I.: The notion of democracy at work in education is still rather elementary. If all people could, and indeed were obliged to, go to school, this would be enough to ensure that education is truly democratic. Of course, things are not so simple, as I have tried to explain in response to your previous questions. Much depends on the cultural paradigms and logic that regulate education. For example, it is not obvious that to submit girls to a curriculum that is designed for masculine subjectivity is a democratic gesture. The same applies to the issue of the integration of different cultures and traditions into a single and unique curriculum or programme.

A crucial question to be posed is: how to negotiate the relations between equality and difference(s)? To substitute 'equivalence' for 'equality' would already be a creative step forward. However, we do not sufficiently interrogate these notions about their fundamental belonging to Western logic, one extraneous to other cultures, which may, for example, have a different conception of feminine culture in comparison with masculine culture. Furthermore, what would be the meaning of equality between the mother and the child? In fact, we are confronted with the need to rethink what democracy itself means. What use is made today of this word? What was its original meaning? To what extent ought we to talk about democracy with another meaning? Would it be suitable to invent another word?

To return to your previous question: might the real interest of the internet lie in the fact of stressing culture rather than simply economic dimensions, notably with regard to globalization? The issue is, then, how to avoid a simple accumulation and, one might say, a capitalization of pieces of information, that can constitute the most terrifying power. No doubt, a shift in emphasis from money to culture would open up the possibility of rethinking and, indeed, re-founding, democracy. Democracy, henceforth, would focus on the becoming of all humans with respect for their differences rather than on the possession of more or fewer material goods.

However, capitalism can also exist in culture, and this form of capitalism is even more basic and more dangerous than other sorts of capitalism.

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