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Fluid Education—a New Pedagogical Possibility

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ABSTRACT

Looking beyond analytical philosophy which underlies most pedagogical thinking, this study presents a novel idea of fluid education. Fluid dialectic is not only a theory but a method of this study, which draws on the Hegelian dialectics supplemented by Taoism. It recognises the messiness of educational reality by exploring how pedagogic antinomies can help transpose, de-fix or reposition traditional roles in the classroom, and therefore allow a different type of teaching, learning or educational adventure to take place. In contrast to a reality of fixed roles in traditional education, it acknowledges the non-linearity and oppositions that an educational reality usually has. However, instead of arguing against it, we believe the tensions and antinomies presented are valuable in dialectic and interparadigmatic teaching and learning. A framework of fluid education that emphasises the dialectic movements between different antinomies is presented. How one is liberated from fixed time, space and position is discussed.

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Background: Demand for New Understanding of Education

One of the major challenges confronting current ways of teaching and learning in education is how to recognise, on the one hand, the holistic and living nature of the topics with different agencies involved in a learning space, and, on the other hand, make it relevant to the complex challenges facing the world. With the rise of new economic engines since the beginning of the twenty-first century such as China, Turkey, and India, and in facing global challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the international geopolitics of education is experiencing a major transformation: moving away from a mono-centred Anglo-American-dominated system towards multi-centred overlapping structures (Amah, 2019; Eriksen, 2019; Telo, 2016). The awareness and recognition of different cultures and systems increasingly has an important impact on our understanding of teaching and learning. Traditional approaches to education based on analytic philosophy and characterised by their formalism, their assumption of fixed roles and their rigid dispositions of a teacher, a learner and knowledge, are no longer sufficient to deal with the increasing complexity facing education as a result of global interconnectedness and the demand for a new perspective to education in the contemporary world.

In responding to this demand, this conceptual study offered a novel concept of fluid education through a unique lens of critical dialectics (Chiang & Karjalainen, 2018). Different from prevalent educational analytical approaches, we argue that an educational reality is not a static, simple or

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linear entity and should not be assumed to be so. Instead, it is a complex and contradictory space for great varieties of pedagogical interactions. It is full of tensions between different ideas, cultures, levels, and positions. Such interpretation of education can be traced back in the thoughts of the early founders of hermeneutic and dialectic pedagogy (*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogic*), such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1968), Theodor Litt (1927), and Hermann Nohl (). The original idea of dialectic education philosophy can be attributed to the theories of Schleiermacher (1990, 1998 trans.) and Hegel (1929, 1977 trans.) in the West, and some Taoist thoughts in the East. The part of classic German school of thought employed here due to the lack of English translation is seen to be at a relatively marginal position in Anglo-American education. It is through revisiting the dialectic concept in classic philosophy that we develop the idea of fluid education. The questions that we would like to explore are: can the concept of fluidity be the contemporary way to interpret the dialectical nature of education? Could it bring forward the dialectic element from current education and offer a different educational adventure? In responding to these questions, this paper first presents the theoretical foundation of the concept of fluidity from the angles of hermeneutics and phenomenology by drawing on Hegelian and some Taoist thoughts, and then offers the novel theory of fluid education by exploring the meanings of Fluid Pedagogy and relevant concepts. A framework of fluid education based on the idea of pedagogical antinomies will be presented and discussed.

Research Method

Apart from being a theory, a fluid or dialectic approach is also a conceptual method itself, which we adopted for this study. We recognise the unique forms that each philosophical tradition can take but, at the same time, the deviation, distance or barriers that those forms may create. In order to go beyond the boundaries, the forms or thinking within each tradition, we used a conceptual method—fluidity or the dialectic—to allow some ambiguity of a conceptual ground so that the established forms can be relaxed, defixed, and fluidised, and therefore a novel perspective can emerge. In this study, we first relaxed some of the fixed boundaries by drawing on and making connection with traditions that normally take different forms, such as Hegelian dialectics, Taoism, and some of Bhaskar's concepts. We then engaged in a dialectical and reflective process in exploring different dimensions of fluidity or the dialectic through those concepts and developed the approach of fluidity or being fluid. Next, we applied it in an educational setting and developed a conceptual framework for fluid education. So, the fluid or dialectic approach is both a theoretical foundation and a method for this conceptual study. This study serves as an example of using a fluid or dialectic method.

Theoretical and Methodical Foundation: Fluidity and the Dialectic

Fluidity or fluid is used here as a metaphor to highlight a unique, but often overlooked, dimension of educational reality: its live, messy, and interparadigmatic nature. It is about the capacity to move to “the other’s” position and then come back to contribute to “one’s” own position to form a “new one”. It entails both the dialectic movement and the reflexive process. To pre-empt potential misunderstanding, we would like to first explain the use of fluidity as a metaphor.

To begin with, the meaning of fluidity here transcends the pessimistic connotation of Bauman's conception of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000; Best, 2020). It means positive progress with firm but flexible positions through dialectic engagement between “one” and “the other”. As Hegel puts it, “the true refutation must enter into the power of the opponent and place itself in the compass of his strength”; furthermore “the refutation must not come from outside; that is, it must not proceed from assumptions which lie beyond that system and do not correspond with it” (Hegel, 1929/1923, p. 215).

The fluidity metaphor also transcends other negative connotations that some may ascribe to it, such as “running anywhere”, “incohesiveness”, and “evaporation”. We acknowledge these as its qualities but regard them in a positive light.

Further, the “running” image of fluidity can be interpreted as a type of emancipation or freedom. For example, Carl Rogers has long advocated freedom to learn and a student-centred approach in learning and teaching across his works (Rogers, 1969, 1951; Rogers et al., 2014). As for the evaporation connotation, Skinner once said, “Education is what survives when what has learned is forgotten” (Eder, 2000). The true object of education is not the transmission of facts but, rather, the inculcation of modes of thought and the cultivation of the mind (Barradell et al., 2018).

Our position is therefore that it is exactly for the reasons stated above that fluidity as a metaphor is employed here—to allow us to recognise the part of educational reality that is often ignored, under-valued or simply swept under the carpet—the messiness and non-linearity of profound complexity and multidimensionality that educational reality represents, in contrast to an educational reality that is traditionally often painted as organised and coherent. We argue that the fluidity metaphor, with the images of repositioning, dissembling, permeating, and penetrating, is useful and powerful for interparadigmatic learning, or learning without borders. Building on these ideas, the metaphor of fluidity/fluid here is used, in particular, to highlight the freedom to flow or move in the messiness of deep interparadigmatic learning between “one” and “the other” through dissembling fixed roles or positions.

Fluidity signifies movement—entailing the act of the move itself as well as the capacity and the willingness to move. In particular, it refers to dialectic movement here. Fluidity thus is a concept distinct from, if not opposite to, concepts with a static, rigid, formalist or dogmatist nature. In Hegel’s study of consciousness, he explains how the dialectical way of thinking is able to overcome the disadvantage of ordinary thinking or understanding which tends to have a fixed proposition, and helps one move into “an other” proposition in order to obtain “absolute knowledge” - the knowledge of consciousness itself (Hegel, 1929, 1977; Stratton-Lake, 1999). Hegel’s work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), can be read as an elaborated demonstration of this dialectical process (Schultz, 2012). For example, the following passage shows how Hegel perceives the development or emergence of the consciousness:

Our account implied that our knowledge of the first object, or the being-*for*-consciousness of the first in-itself, itself becomes the second object. It usually seems to be the case, on the contrary, that our experience of the untruth of our first notion comes by way of a second object which we come upon by chance and externally, so that our part in all this is simply the pure *apprehension* of what is in and for itself. From the present viewpoint, however, the new object shows itself to have come about through a *reversal of consciousness itself*. This way of looking at the matter is something contributed by *us*, by means of which the succession of experiences through which consciousness passes is raised into a scientific progression—but it is not known to the consciousness that we are observing. (1977/1807, pp. 55–56, original italics)

Here, Hegel illustrates the dialectical movement of consciousness. He distinguishes two types of object of which the consciousness is aware at an initial stage: the first is “in-itself” or the consciousness itself; the second is “being-for-consciousness” of this “in-itself”. According to Hegel (ibid.), the second is a reflection of the consciousness on itself or the knowledge of the first. The first, in-itself, once being perceived by itself, is altered and becomes the second, being-for-consciousness, which is a new object. This new object does not contain anything from the first. This is why and how the consciousness changes its direction by turning back to itself and is not known to itself.

In further developing Hegel’s ideas, especially the concept of negation, Bhaskar introduced the idea of “absence”. He pointed out the important role played by “absence” in dialectic, to which he referred as “absenting” for a process, or “absenting of absence” for an end result: “Absenting processes are crucial to dialectic conceived as the logic of *change*—which is absenting” (Bhaskar, 1993, pp. 41–42, original italics). If the dialectic is about change, then absenting is at the core of change for Bhaskar. Through absenting, one is able to alienate from oneself, be reflexive, de-agentified, and detotalised, and therefore to reach a state of “ontic change” (ibid., p. 44). An example of Sophia was given to illustrate this process:

unless Sophia sees herself necessarily acting and so absenting, she cannot reflexively situate (and hence detotalizes) herself. That is to say, she in practice alienates and reifies, and hence absents herself and/or her agency, in a way for which she cannot consistently account. (ibid.)

It is through absenting that any kind of freedom can be reached. “Absenting absences, which act as constraints on wants, needs or (more generally) well-being, is essential to dialectics interpreted as the logic of *freedom*” (Bhaskar, 1993, pp. 41–42).

Another example is Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics of language (1990, 1998). In order to develop a hermeneutic understanding of the language, Schleiermacher perceives hermeneutics as “the art of understanding” (1998, p. 5) and refers to the dialectic as a presentation of such art, or “the principles of the art of philosophising” (Schleiermacher, 1986, p. 4, in Bowie, 1998, p. xx). The dialectic is thus essential in understanding discourse—both its interpretation and its meaning. For instance, in explaining the relationship between speech and thought, he wrote:

Speech is the mediation of the communal nature of thought, and this explains the belonging together of rhetoric and hermeneutics and their common relationship to dialectics. . . . The belonging together of hermeneutics and rhetoric consists in the fact that every act of understanding is the inversion of a speech-act, during which the thought which was the basis of the speech must become conscious. The dependence of both [hermeneutics and rhetoric] on dialectics consists in the fact that development of all knowledge is dependent on both (speech and understanding). (Schleiermacher, 1998, p. 7)

There are at least two corresponding pairs of concepts: (1) speech and thought at an illustrative level, and (2) rhetoric and hermeneutics at an abstract level. Further, two different types of dialectic are also found, which can be referred to as subjective dialectics and objective dialectics, where the former is inter-referential and the latter, extern-referential. Thought for Schleiermacher means inner discourse. Speech in this case mediates thought. Speech and thought thus constitute subjective dialectics within the thinker. On the other hand, the act of understanding of the other is to grasp the thought of the speaker mediated by speech. This explains what Schleiermacher means by “a reversal of speech-act”. In order to develop the knowledge of the speech or the understanding of the rhetoric, objective dialectics between hermeneutics and rhetoric are identified. The intertwining relationships between speech–thought, hermeneutics–rhetoric and between the two pairs are then formed through both subjective and objective dialectics.

This ever-changing nature of reality is also highlighted in Taoism. Taoism described as “heterodox”, which is seen to be in a dialectical relationship with “orthodox” Confucianism in China for Weber (1920/1951 trans.), is in fact characterised by its own dialectical thinking. The stress of the immanent change in the *I-Ching* (易經, tenth–fourth century BC) or *Book of Changes* (Baynes, 1968 trans.) depicts how reality is constantly refreshing, recreating, and reforming itself rather than being static and fixed. This immanent change is inherent in “one” which is originated from and composed of “the opposite others”, such as Yin and Yang or being and non-being, and it is these constant dialectic relationships between “the opposite others” which make “one” alive and regenerating (Cloudsley, 1986; Kim, 2017; Ma-Kellams et al., 2018; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Lao Tsu, in *Tao De Ching*, another key text of Taoism, recognises the ever-changing nature of reality and describes “the way (*dao*)” as something which is not rigid or fixed (Roberts, 2012).

This de-fixation of self-positing leads to a fluid state so that one is able to see from another angle—the angle of “the other”. This can be further understood as that the de-fixated “self” has a less-definite boundary or a “less substance” nature. This is not to say that the self-consciousness abandons its self-certainty (Redding, 1996). Instead, by giving up the fixity part of self-positing, self-consciousness overcomes the limitation of the boundaries and thus enlarges its potentiality to be. It not only increases the possibilities of its being in-itself, but also moves to a “fluid” or “insubstantial” state where the individual and the universal unite. Merleau-Ponty, in his study of body and mind, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1974), highlights the incorporeal nature of fluidity. Body, which is both subject and object, both at the centre and in the margin, both internal and external to perceptions, confuses the boundaries:

To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me. (Merleau-Ponty, 1974, p. 90, original italics)


It is therefore at the same time corporeal and incorporeal. In a similar way, Tugendhat in both his works, *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy* and *Das Sein und das Nichts*, argues for the nothingness nature of “being”: being as nothing (1982/1976, in Rosen, 1982). He challenges the tendency in the tradition of occidental philosophy to treat “being as something” with some substance. Instead, he equates the nature of being with nothingness—the insubstantial nature of being.

One important feature of fluidity is the relevance of “the other”. Different from other concepts such as reductionism, structuralism or positivism, “the other” plays an important role in dialectical thinking (Demorgon, 2000; Hegel, 1977/1807, pp. 24–25, 217; Redding, 1996, pp. 103, 113; Schleiermacher, 1990/1819, p. 98).

The value of “the other” in the dialectic lies in its going beyond one-sidedness. It offers possibilities and potentialities for “one”, and therefore opens up a multi-dimensional space. In this process, “the other” contributes to what both Hegel and Gadamer called a reflective movement (Hegel, 1929/1923; Rosen, 1982, p. 28). Rüdiger Bubner, Gadamer’s former student, explains well how the other helps one be reflective through re-examining its own propositions and overcoming its limitations and dogmatism:

The strength of dialectic consists in critically entering into contrary positions in order to uncover the irrational, dogmatic elements [Momente] in them. But this it has only thanks to an aspiration towards reason which it recognizes as binding on itself and which it cannot lay claim to one-sidedly. The engagement aims to uncover irrationality and limitation in order to strengthen rationality. (Bubner, 1973, p. 130, cited in Rosen, 1982, p. 29)

Rosen (1982) interprets this as immanent critique of dialectic. We would like to point out that such critique contributed by “the other” is both a critical and a reflective movement. “One” needs to be willing to engage “the other” on one’s own terms so that “the other” can offer critical reflection for oneself. “The other” thus does not exist outside the system. It is part of the whole (Bråten, 1988).

This echoes the Taoist view of the inherent nature of “the other” within “one”. This is reflected well in the symbol of Tao  (circle symbol/diagram) “yin and yang”, where the “seed fo the other” (dark and white dots) is an integral part of each “other”, and together they form the “one” (Cloudsley, 1986; Peng et al., 2006). Here, the whole is composed of the dark colour usually referred to as Yin, the passive feminine energy, and the white as Yang, the active masculine energy. The curve signifies the dynamic and ever-evolving relationship between the two. This Taoist dialectical thinking manifested in “Yin Yang balancing” is described as a “deep level” dialectic where “a permanent and ultimate balance between mental opposites as a duality” is reached (Li, 2018, p. 45).

Lao Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching* (570?-490? BC/Mitchell, 1988 trans.), highlights not only the importance of contradiction but also the significance of the co-existing, co-related, and interdependent two sides of the opposites (Roberts, 2012; Roberts & Stewart, 2014; Yang, 2019; Yang et al., 2019). “One” and “the other” cannot exist without each other. For example, Lao Tzu states in Chapter 2 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

When people see some things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good,
other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other. (Mitchell, 1988 trans.)

The dialectic as such thus constitutes a kind of “fluid totality” that goes beyond the limitation of “one’s” one-sidedness and is self-transformed into a “new one” that is multi-sided or multi-dimensional (Hegel, 1977/1807, pp. 2, 11, 24–25, 403–404; Rosen, 1982). This is what the Taoist advocates as “an active harmony” with mutually opposed sides of contradiction, yet mutually related and interdependent (Peng et al., 2006). Schleiermacher also highlights the importance of totality in his hermeneutic study of language. For him, speech and thought are united. Since the language is used as a mediation to communicate the thought, in order to understand the meaning of “thought-content”, knowledge of language then becomes indispensable for hermeneutics. Such knowledge consists of a holistic and dialectic understanding of different aspects of human life (Schleiermacher, 1998, p. 8). For Bhaskar, the concept of dialectical totality is not enough. What he refers as the fourth degree of critical realism, dialectical praxis, is fluid totality (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 12). In other words, fluid totality is against the one-dimensional thinking of which dogmatic or structuralist totality consists. Embracing multi-dimensions and diversity, however, does not mean that fluid totality does not have a sense of unity. On the contrary, the concept of “the whole” is strongly emphasised from the beginning, as in Hegel’s thesis discussed above, “the True is the whole”. The multi-sidedness of one is still one. Different from liberalist diversity, fluid totality here, as Findlay puts it well in his Foreword to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, is a “many-sided but truly indivisible whole” (1977, p. x).

Fluid Education and Pedagogical Antinomies

Different from traditional pedagogy, which seeks confirmation, agreement or consistency, pedagogical fluidity arising from the thoughts of dialectical pedagogy highlights the importance and positivity of antinomies.

The dialectical approach to education was mostly developed in the German tradition of hermeneutic pedagogy (*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*) at the beginning of the nineteenth century by authors such as Dilthey (1968), Nohl (1949), Litt (1927), and Spranger (1919, 1969). The dialectical theory of education signifies multi-dimensional thinking where complexities of educational reality, mostly known as pedagogical antinomies, are profoundly studied. Based on those hermeneutico-dialectical ideas, we would like to explore how the concept of antinomy defines the educational realm and what types of antinomy are relevant to educational reality.

The existence of antinomies, in both their ontological and epistemological senses, constitutes our educational reality as well as our understanding of this reality. Unfortunately, the traditional analytic theory of education fails to adopt a fluid perspective and therefore turns away from profound educational reflections (Luchtenberg, 1923, pp. 28, 29). The concept of pedagogical antinomy highlights that there exists not only theoretical tensions and uncertainties but also practical forces of oppositions in the field of education.

Schleiermacher (1990, 1998) was the first to address the issue of antinomies in pedagogy. He thinks that antinomies provide a sufficient base for understanding the special nature of education and human development as a whole (Linke, 1966, p. 72). In the tradition of educational dialectics, the interpretations of pedagogical antinomies vary greatly. What is common, however, is the basic insight that our educational reality is something that cannot be described easily in a one-dimensional way. Any educational reality is controversial and flexible. Becker (1970, p. 59) points out that, unless the existence of pedagogical antinomies is recognised, educational theories will not be able to avoid one-sided claims and positions; the relationship between theory and practice will not become dynamic, and pedagogical thoughts will not be able to correspond to or reflect the richness of educational reality and all its diversity. Three typical categories of pedagogical antinomy are identified:

- (1) Tensions between different educational methods, tools and strategies: such as demanding versus adapting; authoritative versus permissive; content-centred versus student-centred.

- (2) Tensions between different visions concerning the significance and the goal of education: such as, individuality versus communality; knowledge versus skills; vocational skills versus general knowledge; emotional versus intellectual.
- (3) Contradictions in defining basic concepts of education: for example, the meanings of “teaching”, “education” and “learning”. (Becker, 1970, pp. 58–59)

Influenced by French and German philosophical traditions, Juho A. Hollo, an influential Finnish educator, advocates a dialectical approach to education. He argues that educational reality is characterised by polarising tensions between opposite elements; polar referring to the seemingly opposite but logically deeply connected poles of an educational phenomena, which lead us to make oppositional or contradictory claims regarding education. If an educational theoretician or an educator ignores one side of the antinomy, practical educational activities can turn out to be ineffective or even damaging. Different or oppositional elements of education should not override each other; rather, they must be deeply interrelated (Hollo, 1927, 1932, 1944).

The philosophical concept of polarity is essential for understanding the dialectical nature of educational reality (Rach, 1967, p. 22). Nohl (1949) strongly argues for this concept in pedagogical settings. The polarised tensions in his opinion represent the very essence of human existence. For example, the polar interplay of rationality and irrationality forms a large part of human inner life (Nohl, *ibid.*, pp. 86–98). In the context of education, interaction begins with the encounter of a child and an adult, a student and a teacher. The basic educational relation between “one”, who needs education, and “the other”, who educates, is the source of polar construction of educational reality. This existential encounter lays the foundation for all historical and theoretical tensions in education (Nohl, 1914/1979, p. 24). Depending on the particular contextual factors, this antinomy can also take the form of oppositions between generations, institutions, cultures, roles, interests, and personalities. The core of this antinomy is the tension between “one” and “the other”—the original disharmony between subjective self-consciousness and the objective world. The genesis of this basic antinomy is inevitable, and therefore it should be recognised rather than ignored. Referred to as “inherent tension”, Ryberg et al. (2020) argues that the role of a teacher is to evoke tensions, contradictions or challenges, and, if possible, to design or build in those tensions in the pedagogy to allow “structured freedom”. This incorporates the idea of “design for learning”, a way to transform traditional teaching into indirect design, facilitation or orchestration (Goodyear & Dimitriadis, 2013).

Educational encounters signify not only interactions between a student and a teacher but also intermediate factors such as educational content, discipline or subject knowledge. If we exclude any teacher position, what is left in an educational reality is the physical and cultural complexity of the world around an individual student. If the student’s task is to learn about the world truthfully, s/he must learn all the content necessary to become a plenipotentiary actor to deal with the world. The content itself, however, is neither a fixed nor a static substance. It emanates from the basic antinomies of its own. The initial antinomy of the educational content lies in the polar tensions between the traditional and the scientific drives to create new knowledge. Every individual is constantly living in the field of tensions between fixed beliefs and creative possibilities of knowledge. Authors like Litt, Klafki, and Derpolav, influenced by Hegelian philosophy, have elaborated educational theory for human development from the point of dialectical knowledge (Derbolav, 1969; Klafki, 1972/2019; Litt, 1927; Restad, 2019; Schmied-Kowarzig, 1974).

Drawing on the ideas discussed so far, two important dimensions of pedagogical antinomies are identified: (1) student–teacher and (2) existing knowledge–new knowledge. Based on what has been discussed, we generated a diagram to capture educational reality perceived from the angle of fluid and dialectical relationships between the two dimensions (Figure 1). It is drawn from a learner’s point of view so that the student (including learners, children or novices) is positioned as “one” or “subject”, whereas the teacher (educators, parents or experts), discipline (existing knowledge,

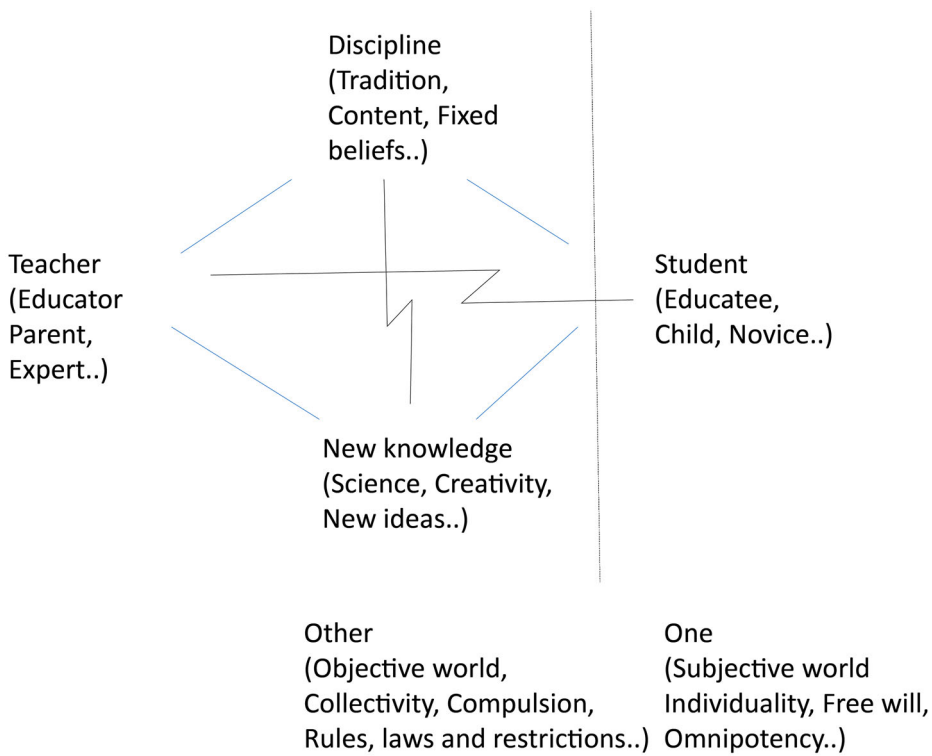


Figure 1. Pedagogic antinomies.

tradition, solidified subject contents or beliefs), and new knowledge (science, creativity or new ideas) are placed in “the other” or “object” positions. It shows how tensions between “one” and different “others” facilitate a dialectical relationship between them and how important it is to defix one’s pre-determined position in order to facilitate one and the other’s learning (Williams, 2012). Dervin and Dirba (2006), taking the example of speaking a foreign language, argue that one sometimes needs to take a position as a “stranger” to achieve effective communication in an intercultural context.

Poles of pedagogical antinomies are understood to be logically reciprocal instead of logically exclusive (Linke, 1966, p. 25). For example, one’s individual drive does not negate the existence of a collective ground. However, if one or the other is set to override the other, problems are more likely to be encountered. Pedagogical activities inevitably take place in a field full of dialectical tensions. Among those tensions, educators, consciously or unconsciously, find some solutions during action through either making choices or trying to compromise. Dealing with pedagogical antinomies and living within dialectical tensions therefore constitute to a large extent the educational reality that we know and we experience. Those tensions offer opportunities for the creation of a fluid space for learning and teaching. Fluid dialectics thus has an important impact on educational practices. One example is the dialogue pedagogy, where the tension between a teacher and a student is used to facilitate educational discussion. Unlike small group activities, educational practices on a large scale, such as large lectures, however, are still rather rigid and routinised.

Following our discussion, the question then is: Would educational theory and practice be able to take a step further when the old dialectical pedagogy is reconstructed through the concept of fluidity?

Fluid Approach to Education: Fluid Time and Fluid Space

Dialectic pedagogy emphasises that educational reality is multidimensional and enigmatic. The history of education also shows the great variation in educational theories and applications, together with their pros and cons, and with different lifespans when social cultural contexts are considered. No theory seems to have an eternal validity. Educational reality has great plasticity but at the same time is the playground of powerful inner forces. It is like a fluid living entity. Fluidity is thus not only a relevant, but an important perspective for education. Fluid education provides the possibility to explore and relate to the world differently. It signifies a fluid approach to education, where pedagogical antinomies are highlighted, and learning and teaching take place in fluid time and fluid space. In fluid pedagogy, “one” is encouraged to reinvent, redefine, and re-create itself through actively engaging with “the other”; as Hegel puts it:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (1977/1807, p. 111)

This approach has double signification in both aspects of time and space: in fluid education, both its time and space are fluid. Traditionally, each person is assigned to a fixed position or role, such as “student” or “teacher”, in a well-defined educational context. Within such a context, the person is expected to take on this given position or role. In other words, “one” is fixated on a certain position. Because of this fixation, the time and space of this educational context also anchor themselves to it. As a result, the person is confined in a familiar or secure position, either “student” or “teacher”, in the fixed time and space of an educational context. The educational reality of such a context is thus static and formal, and can become stagnant, dogmatic or rigid.

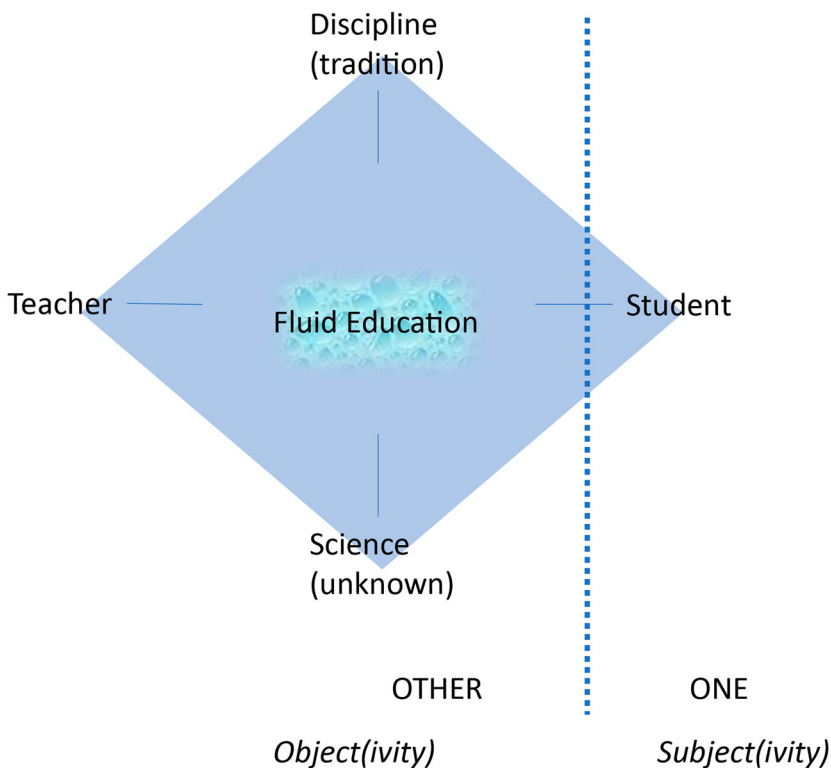


Figure 2. Fluid education.

Fluid education, however, offers a different educational possibility, which is presented in Figure 2. From a learner's point of view, the oppositions between "one" and "the other" in dialectic relationships, such as student and teacher, student and "the known" (discipline), and student and "the unknown" (science), signify the potentiality of fluid exchanges in this educational reality. For example, the "student" and the "teacher" can become "colleagues" and therefore take a dialogic approach in a shared enterprise of exploring a domain of knowledge (Wegerif, 2013). Bhaskar's (1993) concepts of absenting and the existence of the "non-being" correspond well here. Absenting helps one to defix, deagentise or liberate oneself from a presupposed position, in this case the roles of "student" or "teacher" in order to move to or reach a different state. Guilherme (2000), taking the teaching of culture as an example, furthers the point by emphasising the importance for a teacher of defixing her/his traditional role in a learning context in order to better explore the dynamics of culture and the true nature of the subject matter:

Teachers need to discard their role as ambassadors of a foreign culture and the concept of a static, self-contained and strange culture. Instead, they must acknowledge the interactive nature and the social, political, and ethical implications of learning/teaching about culture. (p. 300)

In another example, Lau Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching* (Mitchell, 1988 trans.) talks about what real teacher or teaching means through Taoist reasoning; that is, "to be is not to be":

Therefore the Master
acts without doing anything
and teaches without saying anything.
Things arise and she lets them come;
things disappear and she lets them go.
She has but doesn't possess,
acts but doesn't expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever. (Chapter 2)

Due to its constant refurbishment of its own grounds, both time (now and then as in new versus established knowledge) and space (here and there) are unfixed in fluid education. It is able to go beyond the boundaries and de-fixate "one's" positions. People who are involved in this "educational adventure" take on different positions in different moments and in different situations of their learning. Educational positions, such as teacher, student, observer, facilitator, learner, participant, enquirer, knower, explorer, demonstrator, or experimenter, are all liberated from traditional assigned roles, and further, are able to freely flow, converge into or diverge from each other.

The time and space of educational reality are therefore liberated. The liberation of time lies in the internal fluid state in any given moment as a learner or teacher. Time is fluid in that a person is free to be and become "one" or "the other" in any given moment. A person takes on "the other's" positions and therefore has the potential to "become the other" in this moment. "A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it" (Hegel, 1977/1807, p. 110). In the fluid state of time, a person is free to build a dialectic relationship with "the other" through learning to be "one and the other". For example, in any given moment, a person, traditionally perceived as a "student", can take on any one of the above positions or multiple positions such as knower, learner, and experimenter, and so does a "teacher". These positions can shift again in the next moment according to new arising learning/teaching situations.

This internal fluid state of learning and teaching liberates a person from traditional confinement of time. Once a person is no longer restricted by a traditionally defined position for a certain period of time, time is no longer inert, latent or fixed for this person. Intersubjectivity in this sense helps fluidise the concept of time, and therefore opens up possibilities and potentialities for "one" to "learn to be" or "learn to become" (Bråten, 1988). It therefore facilitates the mobility between "then" or old self and "now" or new self/ "new one".

Thus the movement is simply the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses. Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. (Hegel, 1977/1807, p. 112)

In a similar way, the liberation of space lies in the external fluid state of learning or teaching. The defixation of “one’s” position and the recognition of “the other” create a dynamic and flowing space between “here” or “one” and “there” or “the other”. To enable such fluid movement, there are two important contributing factors: positive negation and reciprocal recognition. To begin with, according to Hegel, the negation of oneself, or what he calls “determinate negation”, can be difficult and struggling for “one”, but it is not a negative act. It helps free “one” from one-sided view and so that new form can arise. It is “in the negation the transition is made through which the progress through the complete series of forms comes about of itself” (Hegel, 1977/1807, p. 51). The same logic applies to the negation of “the other”, which helps “one” to return to itself, to form a new self and to liberate from both “one” and “the other”.

This ambiguous supersession of its ambiguous otherness is equally an ambiguous return *into itself*. ... The other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but supersedes this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free. (Hegel, 1977/1807, p. 111)

Another important point is the reciprocal recognition between “one” and “the other”. To come out of “one’s” position and move to “the other’s”, “one” needs to recognise “the other” first, as discussed in the previous section. Hegel further argues that, for “one” to exist, it needs to be recognised by “the other” too. “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (*ibid.*, p. 111). Thus “self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” (*ibid.*, p. 110). It is in this fluid totality that “one” and “the other” depend on each other to evolve or recreate themselves, and to obtain existential meanings. In other words, mutual recognition between “one” and “the other” plays an important role in the dialectic movement in space: “one” needs to recognise “the other” and be recognised by “the other” in order to move into “the other” and recreate a “new one”.

In a learning and teaching context, this means that participants (both students and teachers) can negate their traditionally assigned roles and choose different positions in a given moment, which will facilitate their own learning and teaching; most importantly, these new and often unfamiliar positions are then accepted and recognised by “the other” in the same context, which forms a fluid totality. Take a group discussion in fluid education as an example. Person A can refuse the traditionally assigned position as a student and take on the roles of a participant, a facilitator, and an enquirer; person B can supersede the traditionally assigned position as a student too and take on the roles of an observer, a participant, and a knower; person C can negate the traditionally assigned role as a teacher and take on the roles of an observer, a participant, and a learner. Each of them, by repositioning themselves internally towards different or new positions, has already created a fluid movement in time between “now” and “then”. Once these different or new positions are recognised by “the other”, fluid movement in space between “here” and “there” is then created. A fluid totality of learning and teaching in this context, then, is born. It is within these constant movements and dialogues between now and then, here and there, that fluid teaching and learning are formed.

The traditional division or boundary between “students” and “teachers” is therefore challenged. In fluid education, there is no fixed role attached to a person in any given time or in any given space. The “student” can be a facilitator, an observer, and a participant simultaneously in this moment, and so can a “teacher” be a learner, a participant or an explorer, and there is a mutual recognition of the change of these positions. Educational reality is constantly defined, redefined, and therefore broadened.

Conclusion

This study develops the conception of fluid education by using fluid dialectic as a conceptual method. Fluid education has a close connection with the dialectic developed by classic German theorists such as Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Bhaskar, as well as Taoism. From this perspective, the concept of fluidity is explored from three angles: a dialectic approach, the relevance of “the other”, and fluid totality. Fluidity in light of Hegelian and Taoist works signifies a dialectic approach where process and movement are highlighted. What is valuable in this dialectic approach is its de-fixation power. It helps liberate “one” from both internal and external fixed boundaries and reach a state where corporeality and incorporeality exist at the same time.

“The other” is relevant in the concept of fluidity. It offers the necessary opposition to “one” so that the space needed for “one’s” critical and reflective movements is created. It allows “one” to become “the other”, reflect on “one’s” own and form a “new one”. It is in this intersubjective and fluid exchange between “one” and “the oppositional other” that the one-sidedness of Hegel’s initial incomplete consciousness is overcome. This “immanent critique of dialectic” is achieved by constantly challenging oneself and actively engaging “the other”, for “the other” is not outside—it is part of the system, the whole. Due to this intersubjectivity between “one” and “the other”, the concept of wholeness consists of “one in otherness” and “otherness in one”. This leads to another important point, fluid totality. Different from dogmatic totality, which is static and has a fixed boundary, fluid totality is characterised by its dialectic, engaging, and multi-dimensional nature, which is constantly defining and redefining its own boundaries. For a totality to be fluid, it needs to negate itself. This helps “one” go beyond one-sidedness and reach its multi-sided whole. From a Hegelian and Taoist perspective, the truth lies in the wholeness that is “many-sided but truly indivisible”.

In education, pedagogical antinomies offer the necessary oppositions of “the other” for “one”. The fundamental opposition between “one” who needs to be educated and “the other” who educates forms the cornerstone for a fluid and dialectical educational process. Other oppositions include possible cultural, generational, institutional, gender, social, historical, and character-wise differences. These different antinomies come from the ontological tension between “one”, the subjective, and “the other”, the objective. Different from traditional analytic education that separates and fixates “one” and “the other”, and by doing so fails to satisfactorily deal with the fundamental opposition between the two, fluid education drawing on Hegelian philosophy argues that “one and the other” are not two separate entities: both are part of a whole. By recognising “the other”, educational reality becomes de-fixated and fluid. In order to develop “one”—a “new one”—“one” needs to engage “the other” and come to “the other’s” places. “The other” offers the potentiality for “one” to be and become.

A framework of fluid education based on the idea of pedagogical antinomies is offered. It shows how fluid teaching and fluid learning are possible through pedagogical antinomies. In this unique educational reality, both its time and space are fluid. Time becomes fluid because, through an intersubjective relationship with “the other”, “one” can reinvent itself and form a new self in any given moment. Space becomes fluid because “one” is able to de-fixate its own position and come to a different other’s position. Learners in fluid education are therefore liberated from their fixed roles—both the one that they are given and the one that they identify themselves with. The first liberation links to fluid space—being able to move from one “here”, the familiar, toward the other, the foreign “there”. The second liberation is related to fluid time—being able to form a new one “now”, where the old one “then” is refuted.

Fluid education is therefore not only about “one”, but “the other in one”; not only about “the known”, but “the unknown in the known”; not only about the familiar, but the foreign in the familiar; not only about the subjective, but the objective in the subjective; not only about the part, but the whole in the part. We hope that the concept of fluidity and fluid education offers a different but

useful understanding of teaching and learning and sheds some light on current shortcomings and challenges facing traditional analytic education.

Disclosure Statement

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