

Know Thy Impact: Blind Spots in John Hattie's Evidence Credo

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ABSTRACT

“Know thy impact and importance.” Such is the credo and the message of Professor John Hattie’s work *Visible Learning for Teachers. Maximizing Impact in Learning* (2012), based on summaries of 800 meta-analyses (covering 50,000 individual studies and approximately 240 million students) of the total of 138 different factors that affect learning. Hattie is one of the most cited and influential researchers in the field of education and recently, in collaboration with the cognitive psychologist Gregory Yates, he wrote: *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn* (2014).

Hattie launches an unsurprising but hard-hitting conclusion, that teachers are the strongest factors of influence for learning. They must be passionately engaged in teaching and learning processes and construct meaningful experiences. Teachers have to see learning through the eyes of the students and both teachers and students must honour the learning objectives and goal achievement.

But there are several flaws in Hattie’s thinking and ways of arguing.

What is the substance (ontology) of an effect? Does it consist of something as simple as a correct answer in a multiple-choice test and the absence of arithmetic and spelling errors? Additionally, he is sociologically naïve and pays no attention to interactions in the classroom and the changing knowledge policy strategies of the states that govern and control learning institutions. Thirdly, he does not methodologically reflect upon the transformation of knowledge when it becomes formalized in meta-analyses. Fourthly, he neither qualifies the profound nor the contemporary pedagogical vocabulary. Fifthly, there is an intrinsic conflict, perhaps even a logical contradiction, in his relying on big data while proclaiming that each teacher must have an eye for the unique student who probably cannot be generalized into a best practice induced ideal type. Finally, Hattie shows a very limited knowledge of neuroplasticity and the great brain expectations.

KNOW THY IMPACT: BLIND SPOTS IN JOHN HATTIE’S EVIDENCE CREDO

‘*Know thy impact and importance.*’ Such is the credo and the apparently open and democratic message of the New Zealand professor John Hattie’s work *Visible Learning for Teachers. Maximizing Impact in Learning* (2012) (see Nepper Larsen 2013a for a review), based on the summaries of more than 800 meta-analyses (covering more than 50,000 individual studies and approximately 240 million students) of a total of 138 different factors that affect learning. Hattie is employed at the University of Melbourne in Australia, and is one of the most cited and influential researchers in the field of education today (Spiewak 2014: 77).

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Hattie's analysis culminates with an unsurprising but hard-hitting conclusion that states teachers are one of the strongest factors of influence for learning, and they must be actively and passionately engaged in the teaching and learning process. He claims teachers must be aware of every student's knowledge and skills and be able to construct meaning and meaningful experiences in different contextual settings, and they have to see learning through students' eyes. He also emphasizes that both teachers and students must be aware of the learning objectives and criteria for goal achievement.

In Hattie's perspective learning is to be seen as an effect (output) of a variety of factors (inputs) among which the teachers' actions are said to be the primary factor. Learning is depicted as a visible phenomenon that has to be maximized as a goal (an idealized telos). At the same time learning is seen as an agenda 'inhabited' by identifiable strategic subjects.

THE FIRST AMONG SEVERAL FLAWS IN HATTIE'S BOOK: WHAT IS AN EFFECT?

John Hattie never explains what the substance of an effect is. What is an effect's ontology, its way of being in the world? Does it consist of something as simple as a correct answer on a multiple-choice task, the absence of arithmetic and spelling errors? And may all the power of teaching and learning processes (including abstract and imaginative thinking, history of ideas and concepts, historical knowledge, dedicated experiments, hands-on insights, sudden lucidity, social and language criticism, profound existential discussions, social bonding, and personal, social, and cultural challenges) all translate into an effect score without loss? Such basic and highly important philosophical and methodological questions do not seem to concern the evidence preaching practitioner and missionary Hattie.

Figures taken out of context say little, and Hattie never contextualizes his procedures; nor does he shed any light on matters thorough epistemological reflections upon the 'nature' of the context in which his never simply neutral analyses take place (Lankau 2014: 68). Thus, his models and accounting logics are inscribed in a blindfolded but manifest politics of knowledge and power-knowledge discourses (Nepper Larsen 2011). "It is important to note that 'effectiveness' is an instrumental value: it refers to the quality of processes but does not say anything about what in intervention is supposed to bring about. This means, among other things, that it is meaningless to talk about effective teaching of effective schooling; the question that always needs to be asked is, effective for what?", professor Gert Biesta from

London emphasizes (Biesta 2007: 7-8).

I claim that in pedagogy and *Bildung* processes (the German word is impossible to translate without a loss: “formation,” “culture,” “edification”...), we do not need prime mover cause-effect logics (Nepper Larsen 2013d and 2015b). Pedagogy and *Bildung* are far more risky and vulnerable phenomena than estimating cause-effect results in pool billiards, or how to estimate, purify, and cleanse polluted air in the chimneys of coal fused power stations.

Pedagogy is the will to do something *with* (not *to!*) someone with specific goals, ideals, and arguments within a more or less legal and legitimate horizon - always involving teloi, norms/normativity, sanctions, and ideals, and often marks, selection practices, and lifelong learning objectives (Nepper Larsen 2014d). But first and foremost it means to foster and fertilize the learning capability to “count to three” in two eloquent ways:

- I. As the Germans say, the *raison d'être* of educational processes is to bring “*Sache zur Sprache*” (Gadamer 1986: 391) through a knowledge-based practice that always is intertwined with semantic melodies, rhythms, rhetorical devices (Nepper Larsen 2009 and 2014c), and never just takes place as a passive intake stemming from the fact that teacher A does something with student B. For example: between the Big-Bang as a billion-year-old cosmological phenomenon and the theoretical interpretation of this incident that might be seen as the first beginning of our being in the universe, the pupil is invited to dwell and think about evolution, existence, and science. A curious interpreter is being born in the midst of an educational institution, and this *Bildung* process is best expressed by the hermeneutical philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer: “The text brings a subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter. Both have a share in it”(Gadamer 1989: 388).
- II. Crossing the threshold to the school and/or the university you enter a transformative process in which you become a public citizen, and develop an autonomous reason and democratic voice (see Biesta 2009: Chp.2). In this dynamic way you are more than a private self-interested subject (placed in the market for buying and selling goods) and more than an object for the state’s plans for production of the future workforce and injection of a mandatory national curriculum.

The magic of the third hereby has two ways of being in pedagogy and open - and by their social ‘nature’ risky - learning processes: (i) You are invited to and come to wonder about open and inclining relations between *Sache* and *Sprache* reaching far beyond the teacher’s intentions and possible learning plans for you and your own private sphere and psychological constitution; (ii) You come to experience and understand that pedagogy and

your way of being in the world is not reducible to market logic (economy) and state decisions (politics, educational plans), neither is it reducible to private interests and imposed and mandatory learning goals.

ADDITIONAL BLIND SPOTS

Hattie is sociological naïf. He pays no great attention to the interaction in the classroom and he atomizes the solitary individual's learning results. He is not dealing with the changing knowledge policy strategies that control and govern learning institutions (Bologna processes, ECTS-measurement, learning goals in advance, cost efficiency etc. – all of them fixing prescriptions for the content and goals of educational institutions, producing mandatory discourses, and 'serving' strong expectations). That said, we must give him credit when he demonstrates a predilection for good fellowship and mixed classes in which the stronger students inspire and help the weaker ones).

The problem is that the evidence credo is not neutral. It is a mandatory educational politics of knowledge – coming to establish itself as a powerful compulsory social steering technology. And it is hard to be against its (creeping, enforced, and demonstrative) will to be positive (Nepper Larsen 2015a and 2015b). It's hard to argue against 'best practice' in (objective) science (e.g., medicine). Therefore it seems to be the case that 'weak' and soft 'sciences' (like pedagogy and humanities) are already lagging behind when the dominant national politics of knowledge strategies demand effectiveness, results and proof.

Thirdly, the megalomaniac additive annexation of all sorts of meta-analyses is not concerned with methodologically critical self-reflections, nor with validity claims, i.e., it does not specify the limits to what can be said and made commensurable. The risk is that knowledge in the collected empirical data piles disappears when it is formalised in a second-, third-, and- fourth-order perspectives. The problem is that these impressive meta-analyses collect and 'construct' knowledge using identity concepts. The non-identical is eradicated, while the German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno cries in despair and agony. So does critical theory – and so do I (Nepper Larsen 1995: 39-41, 2009: 253-254, and 2013e: 148-149).

The critique of positivism seems to be forgotten in 2015. We would do well to re-read the unforgettable aphorism in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (written in the American exile in

1951). “Prokrustes” reinterprets the old story of the mythical Greek thief Procrustes (Adorno 1985: Appendix IX). He is the master of the roads, and after having caught his victims he ties them to a bed and exposes them to either painful enlargement, while their bodies are being stretched out, or to corporeal restrictions, e.g., by cutting their legs shorter. etc. The bed of Procrustes becomes a powerful picture of modern positivist social science that believes that being and thinking – the object and the concept, reality and language – can be captured in a corresponding 1:1 relation. Hattie has ‘robbed’ millions of learning data and placed them ‘carefully’ in his Procrustean bed, version 2.0.

Fourthly, future expectations that Hattie evidence-based credos and meta-studies can solve all the problems in learning institutions forget that not very many decades ago the absolute buzz-words (at least in major parts of Denmark and Germany) were “experiential learning,” “experiential pedagogy,” “critical reform pedagogy,” and “pedagogy of resistance.” Why do we ‘forget’ to talk with dignity and curiosity about the teachers’ and students’ experience (i.e., *Erfahrung* in German, *erfaring* in Danish), meaning “elaborated experience,” a differentiation one cannot make in English? What has become of the enlightened citizen? Why and how is evidence ‘imperialising’ the right to define without any attempt to inherit and renew the past’s educational vocabulary?

We have come to live in a time without profound historical awareness in which we must acknowledge that Hattie, as the world’s most influential and successful educational thinker, does not contribute to the renewal of the pedagogical vocabulary.

And *fifthly*, there is (or seems to be) an intrinsic conflict - perhaps even a logical contradiction and a paradox - in the set-up of *Visible Learning for Teachers* (Hattie 2012), and in the book’s backbone arguments and pedagogical advice. Proudly and stoutly as a devoted king of statistics Hattie presents his overwhelming 240 million data analyses, but a vigilant reader will notice that he is essentially a practitioner and a thinker who proclaims that each teacher must have an eye for the unique student. However, Hattie does not see and does not want to know that the life and thought of this very student cannot be generalized and transformed into a best-practice-induced ideal type. Therefore the student is rather likely to disappear the more the meta-studies accumulate and pile up – and the more they get transformed into universal clues and keys for many nations’ educational political actions.

THE FINAL FLAW CONCERNS THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE BRAIN

It is an astonishing and unheard-of simplification to describe the teacher as an intentional conductor and primarily responsible for the formation of students' minds, and to claim that we gradually learn to become aware of and thus take control of the brain's own processes (Nepper Larsen 2010a).

The brain is not something we can steer or navigate as an engine or a boat. In his newest book, co-authored with Gregory Yates, *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn* (2014) (see Nepper Larsen 2014b for a review), Hattie states that we also learn without being aware that we learn; but conscious planning of learning programs can nevertheless be firmly recommended.

One can hardly wonder that Hattie has found it politically opportune to try to get access to knowledge that counts as scientific evidence among naturalising neuroscientists (see Nepper Larsen 2013c). For 'clean' pedagogy research does not look like much in today's neuro-age. The great expectations for the fertilization and production of competitive mental capital have to be backed up with neurobiology and cognitive psychology.

In Gregory Yates, Hattie has found a cognitive scientist who is not at all interested in phenomenology of the body and newer interdisciplinary explorations of the relationship between embodiment, embeddedness, enactment and intercorporality (Fuchs 2009, Sheets-Johnstone 1990, Nepper Larsen 2010a and 2010b).

In Yates' very limited perspective the brain can be described as an operating system. But even though Yates has understood that the brain is not just a closed biological machine or the self-generative causal force behind human action, there is desperately little we can read about the relationship between the body's sentiments, the dynamic relationships between learners, and the plastic human brain. The mental forms of learning seem strangely disembodied, and the complex social processes among learners are not conceptualized. Hattie could have gotten a radically different book out of allying himself with a sociologist.

Yates actually individualizes and instrumentalizes the brain when he depicts it as a rational choice actor that has to be formed by learning goals. He even writes that "positive esteem and pride are commodities that can follow from being successful at learning" (2014: 223). A clearer expression of the *zeitgeist* of compulsory self-commodification and the claims

of competitive mental capitalism probably could not be found (Nepper Larsen, 2014b).

THE REQUIREMENT FOR PEDAGOGICAL EVIDENCE IS FLAWED AND MISGUIDED

Advocates of evidence-based pedagogy argue that there can be no possible basis for analyzing pedagogy and making prescriptive recommendations for its improvement except for empirical experience. But all instrumental reasoning derives its meaning from the end selected. But Hattie sees his work as end-neutral: as a pure method of functional means-calculating, it should work regardless of the particular end chosen. It is not up to people like us, Hattie and his pedagogometrists claim and maintain, to say what education should be for; we merely provide the tools for educators to use in helping them arrive at the goals and ends society has laid down. But that is like saying “computers do not determine how they are used.” It is naïve to believe this old idea. Computers have become so ubiquitous that they have drastically changed the social patterns of human interaction and communication and not the least the very idea of “the ends of man.” The same goes for the automobile, which bids fair to wreck our planet ecologically. The choice of instruments is never merely instrumental - it always dialectically modifies the ends it is made to secure. And the two continue to influence each other. Hattie sees his evidence credo as end-neutral but that is an illusion and thereby an utmost useful and powerful instrument in the hands of politicians and school leaders.

Instead of pursuing airy and utopian educational ideals, the educational sciences in Hattie’s slipstream seem primarily concerned with finding out ‘what works’ and providing advice for hungry consumers of ‘best practice’ technics. Evidence thinking proclaims that we do not have to fight and argue any longer when we measure what works best and most effectively.

Evidence thinking wants to put an end to endless and eternal discussions and produce and recommend compulsory and scientifically backed-up master action plans for educational political planners and leaders. The evidence advocacy tends to ‘forget’ that “Education is a teleological practice – a practice framed by a *telos*: an aim or purpose...” (Biesta 2010: 500). While the evidence promoters have a “quasi-causal concept of education,” their critics claim that education is an open system in which the learners “are reflective agents who can make up their own minds and can act on the basis of their insights, preferences and conclusions” (Biesta 2014: 20, 21).

But the problem is simply that it is far from evident what is evident (Nepper Larsen 2011).

Firstly, it is very difficult to formalise and compare precisely what happens in diverse classrooms. Teaching and learning are complex phenomena because the individual is not a neutral average animal and because the social interaction in a class(room) always has influence on what happens and can be taught and learned. This is why a unilateral focus on the individual student's performance may risk distorting the whole picture. Gerd Biesta states that evidence thinking relies on "a kind of magic bullet notion of causality which, if possible at all in the social domain, actually only exists under very special conditions" (Biesta 2010: 496),

Secondly, the criteria for evidence measurement are not themselves evident, but on the contrary, quite often disputed. It is one thing to increase efficiency (to promote learning something more quickly using fewer resources), but quite another if pupils and students are to increase their capability to think in a more imaginative, autonomous and critical way. By then the evidence troops and inspectors have long time gone home (Nepper Larsen 2015b).

Thirdly, any measurement procedure and doctrine produces blindness. When you undertake to order, classify, and measure some factors in a privileged perspective, you tend simultaneously to exclude other ways of understanding and alternative observational perspectives. From the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) to the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998), this problem of awareness has been (maybe it is better to say, "ought to have been") first semester knowledge at the universities in continental Europe living up to their names and heritages of being universities. Looking solely at the test results (the number of correct answers to multiple choice tests), the evidence research manual cannot get closer to a deeper understanding of the learning subject's context, or the relationship between the learner's social background and the professional, didactic-pedagogical 'grip' that spreads joy and fosters intellectual curiosity, or its opposite. By the way, ritualised evidence claims and displaying comparative templates in public might risk promoting *teaching to the test* behaviour in schools. It has certainly done this in the United States.

The main problem is that Hattie thinks that learning is a visible, banal, and countable phenomenon that always and preferably has to be more than "0.4". He wants not only to

maximize but also to visualize the invisible. Thus, he paradoxically makes what is visible and obvious invisible, e.g., that the school is embedded in the national political machine, that social interaction in the classroom is not reducible to learning processes, and that school kids are not just subjected to learning. He and she can play, be united in unconscious joint attention patterns and interhuman actions, daydream and cheat, maybe even being engaged in silent or manifest protest against the learning strategies giving way for learning skills that might prove to be important in the long run (Nepper Larsen 2014a).

Besides, it should be said that Hattie, who wants to deal with visible learning inside the learners, never actually talks to the learners. He is not a phenomenologist and is uninterested in how it feels to be a learner 'inside' a learning process. Hattie deals with strategic educational goals and not with the life of the learners, nor with the long history of the contested learning concept.

CONCLUSION

The global competitive horizon (*Cognitive Capitalism*, the French philosopher and economist Yann Moulier Boutang (2011) precisely labels it), the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, and the political climate always leave their marks on the educational branch (Nepper Larsen 2012, 2013b, and 2015a). There are no 'pure' and neutral teaching tools. Teaching, learning and education never take place in a neutral context. In the so-called learning societies the competing national states eagerly demand learning results.

But every class, any communicative social setting, every hour is a unique event. Genuine teacher experience is fortunately difficult or impossible to formalise. *Bildung* (formation) processes (like thinking, perception and life in general ...) can never be reduced to numbers that will be recognizable in a statistical collection of data (Biesta 2007, 2010, 2014). One of the most irritating traits of Hattie's oeuvre is its ahistorical substance and subject indifference. He fosters, and risks idealizing, the primitive expectations of complex and non-anticipatory learning processes (Korsgaard 2014: 13-13, 25, 78, and 140).

In summary:

- (i) Any *Bildung*, education and learning process is unique and unpredictable. Autonomous and critical pupils and students are not items or goods to be manufactured.

- (ii) The contemporary powerful evidence mindset is instrumentalist and misguided. Evidence claims and advice have their foundation in pseudo-scientific behaviourist and positivist ‘thinking.’
- (iii) For critical educational thinking, evidence projects of all kinds must be understood as fearful illusions. But this remark does, of course, make it obsolete or wrong that teachers and researchers try in advance to map, investigate and discuss learning patterns in *res publica*. Structural knowledge is not *per se* false knowledge, and both enlightening empirical studies and conceptual speculations must be welcomed.
- (iv) There is no simple evidence *of* or *for* evidence measurement. The evidence paradigm is not valid and trustworthy and it does not play a fertile and constructive role in the world of pedagogy and education. But it does not mean that teachers and students cannot learn from each other and their own former experiences (read: *Erfahrungen*), nor that they cannot get inspiration from reading old pedagogical-philosophical classics, or attempt to formulate new theories and write new books... in order to enrich the eternal communication of mankind, discussing how man can practice and learn (better) in educational settings.

CRITICAL SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY

The quest for evidence has to be framed in a wider context of the contemporary international horizon of knowledge politics (see Nepper Larsen and Kryger Pedersen, 2013: 757 and 576- 577). It is obvious that evidence thinking, claims, concepts and techniques get inscribed into the international, national and local educational, political vocabulary and practice. At the same time, the evidence concept and evidence claims are attuned to the dominating and overall neoliberal paradigm, craving value for money and effective production of the future labour force (Nepper Larsen 2015a).

Surprisingly, the teachers’ union, the powerful state planners and the servile educationalists can all use (and abuse) Hattie’s books and messages. At least in Denmark, the teachers use Hattie’s concepts and arguments to state that they are the far most important and decisive learning factor (agent). At the very same time, the educational planners and politicians state that is the teachers’ fault if the learning results are not what they were expected to be, i.e., if they are unable to fit the labour market demands or produce scores as high as in other countries. (Commensurability and competitiveness have established themselves as a profane c- tandem god.)

Teachers get identified as *the* primary and indispensable learning factor and thereby as

a public, expensive, and untrustworthy potential enemy. This amounts to scapegoat projection *par excellence*. The teachers get inscribed in principle-agent theories, their freedom of movement becomes limited, and their professional autonomy gets ‘shaved’ (see Nepper Larsen and Kryger Pedersen 2013: 514). One has to acknowledge that when you receive the right to be the first server, a metaphysic of guilt immediately gets attached to the teachers, who are destined to be canonized (or canonize themselves) as the primary learning movers, second to none.

Evidence concepts and politics seem to play a role as means to counter conflictuality with win-win scenarios and teleological political-pedagogical procedures. Thus, evidence is becoming a powerful floating signifier (Krejsler 2013), an intriguing buzz-word, and a positive identification tool.

One does not have to run (through) the big data of 240 million students to proclaim that well-prepared teachers are a *sine qua non* for teaching and learning. But this simple fact does not make deep and critical questions to John Hattie’s axioms, ways of investigating learning processes, use of meta-studies, and recommendations to educational stakeholders, superfluous. The concluding remark must be that the advantage of John Hattie’s evidence credo is that it is so banal, mundane and trivial that even educational planners and economists can understand it.

I thank Hugh Miller, Trevor Davies, and Andrea Rittersberger for critical and constructive comments and generous and inspiring ideas to an earlier draft of this article.

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