Teaching and Learning for Subjectification

Response to Ruitenberg

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In her paper, Claudia Ruitenberg develops further ideas first proposed by Gert Biesta regarding the functions of education. Biesta responded to a document from the Dutch Education Council talking about the main functions of education by proposing his own, some of which match the document, but also including a new one, subjectification, where agency and intellectual independence are encouraged for learners.

Ruitenberg states that understanding this subjectification function is difficult for teachers, and cites her own work in teacher education as well as some other researchers whose conception of subjectification is not as robust as both Biesta and Ruitenberg. Biesta notes subjectification is most robust in politics or social studies curricula, while it is difficult to generate subjectification within a discipline such as mathematics.

Both Ruitenberg and the authors she cites have worked with teachers in introducing subjectification, and she does not think teachers get to the heart of subjectification when they think of "socializing influence of the home environment (e.g., religious beliefs) and the qualifying influence of the school environment (e.g., emphasis on science) are at odds with each other."[1] Her other authors rely upon political thinking or critical thinking to get at subjectification. Ruitenberg's task is to find a way to make this more intelligible to teachers and theorists, and to show that subjectification can be understood better and taught well if we think about how we relate to the world. She

introduces six modes of relating to the world that show how Biesta's three functions of qualification, socialization, and subjectification are enacted in these modes.

In these six modes of relating to the world, Ruitenberg offers ways to better understand the traditional curriculum common in public schools. A traditional curriculum is heavy on qualification and socialization, even in subjectification-friendly areas such as politics. Many see these two functions as being all that is necessary to a complete education. Ruitenberg has a pedagogic and a philosophical intent here. Pedagogically, it is to "recognize when their educational practice expands or constrains" the subjectification function of education, and philosophically it is to see what will allow educators to use this viewpoint well to propose an education worth having.[2]

That subjectification is difficult for many of us to imagine in schools may be partly due to how normal government run schools are almost wholly edifices of qualification and socialization. It is asking a great deal to see in these routine and accepted institutions that "(t)he idea that students can come into the world as unique subjects does not mean that they are somehow no longer affected by the influences of socialization and qualification, but rather that they transcend or resist these influences to emerge as agentic and unique subjects."[3]

How best do we get the subjectification function to be as robust as possible? Qualification is built into a discipline or field of study, where concepts, information, and facts associated with it become the qualification. Similarly, the socialization function comes about through learning the components of qualification, interacting with others about these components, and achieving certain milestones of qualification while working with others. Subjectification goes beyond these two rather ordinary functions of education by uniting them

to lead us to an education that is individual, agentic, and beyond the structures of facts, information, and concepts of the disciplines.

I see this occurring inside and outside a classroom of course, but let us discuss how this might happen in a classroom, and perhaps too, how it is difficult to achieve. First, it should be a safe and hospitable place. By safe, I mean clear of danger or harm of course, but also a place where one can venture new formulations of self. That is where hospitality in education, in welcoming not only the stranger but also the strange or different is possible.

While it is not within the scope of the paper, one could look at alternative schools for where the agentic function is more robust, and then even perhaps import that back into traditional schools. That is what I try to do in a modest way in my undergraduate learning and development class, where students largely from traditional schools with divided subject matter are exposed to what I call alternative schools, such as democratic, free, Montessori, Waldorf, and other schools, and they must do a major group project. Some are amused, puzzled, and exasperated by the lack of what they would recognize as a curriculum, such as at Summerhill or other experiments in free education. This begs a separate question: is it best to have qualification and socialization as part of what is expressly done in schools, and then attend to subjectification? Alternatively, does one look dimly on Summerhill and other experiments in free education, where qualification and socialization are not expressly attended in what seems to many an unstructured learning environment?

The main achievement of subjectification that Ruitenberg alludes to is that by foregrounding and emphasizing its place as both she and Biesta do, one achieves a different curriculum altogether. Cross-curricular understanding by way of Ruitenberg's six relations

is enriching and points to ways to consider curricula not divided into subject matter. The whole discussion of different subjects and how they support or do not support subjectification collapses if one follows through on the centrality of subjectification and points to other ways that curriculum can be challenged and brought under a unitary focus infused and informed by subjectification, which itself is informed by cross-curricular understanding of how we relate to the world.

I have some observations about the six relations Ruitenberg offers as an improvement upon Biesta. In practice, it would take an imaginative and daring teacher to keep a fluid understanding of these six relations, lest teachers just codify and implement them rather than these relations being more like observations that allow us to expand our notions of the functions and purposes of education. As such, they are meant to be discussed, and perhaps amplified or discarded.

I will make three comments on Ruitenberg's relations. First, the connection to subjectification with the technical relation seems like a stretch. What does one acquire as a maker that is subjectification? One understands material and makes one's way in the world by making? Yet, if you are a making subject, you have not transcended your material. Perhaps you would do so if you enter the aesthetic realm. Aesthetic relations subsume the making subject and transform the material in a way that agency is more thorough and obvious, and indeed Ruitenberg notes two ways to achieve aesthetic subjectification: an "emancipation from the learned conventions of what is beautiful and an agency in making aesthetic judgements. For some, aesthetic *subjectification* will happen and manifest itself in their own practice as artists."[4]

Second, the most novel relation that Ruitenberg presents is the physical. How we understand ourselves as physical beings beyond

qualification and socialization is fascinating. Physical subjectification is being aware of one's body and its limits to allow one to transcend it: "For example, a young woman who has been socialized into sitting with her legs crossed, speaking quietly, and generally taking up little physical space may decide that is not how she wants to be in the world. A deaf student who has learned to hide his deafness by perfecting his lip-reading may choose to sign freely."[5] I would want to explore this more and to see it in practice.

Third, Ruitenberg at the end states that not all of these relations may be necessary to achieve subjectification. She mentions that these six are not exhaustive while bringing up an alternative, a religious or spiritual relation, in a footnote. Religious or spiritual relations seem at face value to be prime for subjectification, but we need to be wary of the tradition we are talking about, where some would take subjectification as an end and others would obviate it by relying on authoritarian deities or texts.

Ruitenberg concludes her paper by commenting on whether education should offer the subjectifying function for all students in all ways, and thinks this may be asking too much. If a student gained a sense of oneself as an artist by playing a musical instrument, he or she need not have all or even most of the others. Of course, this begs the question whether there are more effective subjectification experiences. We would need some more information on how the modes differ in practice. For instance, is it best to encourage epistemic subjectification, which leads to a more robust sense of self with ethical and political ways of relation to the world, than to just allow others to be either aesthetes or makers? Alternatively, should we advocate political subjectification over others, so that they are subsumed under it, and there is an overt call for political awareness as an agent?

Finally, I have two further questions on teaching and learning for subjectification. First, is this something best achieved in a teacher-student relation, and if so, would it be possible to achieve wholly online? I would welcome discussion of subjectification that occurs in not only online learning but also where a learner is on their own. I am having some difficulty with such. Second, how do you go about finding ways to individualize the subjectification function of education for different students? This would take a teacher who knows their students well and can find ways to move them in particular toward subjectification. This may be a daunting task, especially for online or self-directed learning, but even in intimate face-to-face interactions. However, should we not be constructing learning environments that encourage that "composite" of qualification, socialization, and subjectification that Biesta proposes to afford students worthwhile education?

Endnotes

1   Claudia Ruitenberg, "The Subjectification Function of Education: A Proposal for a Cross-Curricular Understanding," *Philosophy of Education* 2020, no. 2 (2020).

2   Ruitenberg, "The Subjectification Function."

3   Ruitenberg, "The Subjectification Function."

4   Ruitenberg, "The Subjectification Function."

5   Ruitenberg, "The Subjectification Function."