

A Personal Introduction to Knud Illeris’ *Problemorientering og Deltagerstyring – Oplæg til en Alternativ Didaktik*

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Abstract

This paper presents a personal introduction to Knud Illeris’ *Problemorientering og deltagerstyring – oplæg til en alternativ didaktik* [problem-orientation and participant-direction – a draft for an alternative didactic], published first in 1974. Illeris is one of the founding fathers of PBL in Denmark, and 50 years after its first publication it seems fitting to re-read the book, and I hope others will do the same. Introduced to PBL as something sprawling from the counterculture, youth rebellion, and progressive pedagogies, I found Illeris’ book to be both inspiring and a bit underwhelming, and in many cases foreshadowing neoliberal conceptions of outcome-based education.

Keywords: PBL; Problem-oriented and project-oriented learning; Didactic

Introduction

God knows how many times I have deleted and written a new introduction. Today, a grey Wednesday in September is yet another one. On my way to work while stuck in a queue on the motorway with my fellow commuters, most of them alone in their car like me, I wondered – if I were to convince the persons in the cars surrounding me to read what I consider an essential work on

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problem-based learning what would I say? Why would they care about a book first published in 1974 concerning an alternative didactic suitable for a complex capitalist society? 'Get on with it,' I imagine one shouting, much like in Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

The book is quite practical and hands-on, and several pages are dedicated to the planning and completion of Illeris¹ proposed solution to an educational system in crisis. I find the toolbox part of the book interesting, but it is very much a cookbook – what do I need for this pedagogical stew and how should I serve it? However, I find the trip to the grocery most exciting – what are the broader societal claims for why the time is right for stew? (GET ON WITH IT!) *More pragmatic than ideological*, I would shout, *some PBL are more equal than others*. The commuter in the car next to mine looks at me like I am psychotic as I mime 'hello' out the window as our eyes meet. One less to convince.

Illeris' book is an important one, an essential one in my opinion. But also, a surprisingly pragmatic one that in many ways is in tension with the rebellious and mythologised narrative presented to me as a new student at a PBL institution. Even more, PBL continues to be hailed as an innovative pedagogical model fifty(two) years after its inception. So does the emphasis on origins and hero inventors (here too!). The powerful rhetorics of a model. In Illeris' (1974/1978) *Problemorientering og deltagerstyring – oplæg til en alternativ didaktik* [*problem-orientation and participant-direction – a draft for an alternative didactic*], (my translation), however, I found little of what I thought the youth rebellion was. Following Barnett's (2024) critique of the sacred and profane, Bildung and the Humboldtian university, I can help but wonder if I feeling a loss for something that perhaps wasn't there in the first place, and have since been romanticised into being or subsumed into invisibility? A strange case of solastalgia of an imagination. My initial response was disdain, this can't be the alternative that set things in motion, why are Illeris' ideas so closely aligned with capitalist management and employability conceptions of education? A necessary alignment, Illeris acknowledges (1974/1978, pp. 251), if the draft is to become more than an idea.

The perceived mismatch between education and industry based on anticipated means of production was a primary argument laying the ground for my own Ph.D., and perhaps it was Ph.D.-fatigueness that made me think *not this strained argument yet again, why hasn't this horse turned into pulp yet*. The unknown future as a steering mechanism (see Hultqvist, 2008) – an organising technology through which we address uncertainty with fictionalised certainty. The everchanging structure of the pulp poses challenges for educational institutions. What the pulp was is not important, it is there and from this, we

shall make our juice and drink it too. What are our tools, and what processes can we think of? Problem-oriented and participant-directed education or student-centered learning, of course. Let the students bring their bottles. *Get on with it, the pulp metaphor is disgusting*, somebody whispers.

No more stew or pulp

Uncertainty is often a hallmark of the language of educational reforms, and as *the fight for education is too important to be left solely to the educators*, we get plenty of those. An ever-increasing amount of contextually demarcated literacies, and the introduction of competencies defined now for a future we do not know. *Educational lag*, paraphrasing Ogburn's (1922) cultural lag, concerning technological acceleration and changes in means of production seems like a persisting lag (see for instance Rosa, 2015), and educational institutions are often lambasted for not keeping apace (Cuban, 1986; Labaree, 2008; Peters et al., 2018).

In Illeris' (1974/1978) draft this educational lag runs as a central argument for an alternative didactic suitable for *the modern, complicated, capitalist society* (p. 31). I managed to find and purchase the second edition from 1978, containing, according to the author, only a few corrections made to the first edition. This, the second edition from 1978 (my copy), is the subject of the personal introduction presented in this paper. Illeris is often highlighted as a key figure in the Danish rendition of PBL – even though he, as far as I can tell, did not use that acronym. Recently, Sørensen (2023) provided a careful reading of Illeris' 1974 draft and noted that several scholars consider Illeris fundamental or at least influential for Danish reform pedagogy emerging in the 1970s (p. 76).

To a critical reader, Illeris' essential work may seem a bit too oriented towards local and less generalisable perspectives on problem-oriented and project-organised learning (POPBL). The book is even written in Danish! Not much concern for impact factor!? However, the theoretical foundations for Illeris' draft are present in the medicinal PBL emerging nearly simultaneously (see Clausen, 2023 or Servant, 2016) – although curing different ailments.

Following the brush

In the following, I shall follow the brush, described by Thomas J. Harper in the afterword to Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1977):

“One of the oldest and most deeply ingrained of Japanese attitudes to literary style holds that too obvious a structure is a contrivance, that too orderly an exposition falsifies the ruminations of the heart, that the truest representation of the searching mind is just to “follow the brush” (...) It is not that Japanese writers have been ignorant of the powers of concision and articulation. Rather they have felt that certain subjects – the vicissitudes of the emotions, the fleeting perceptions of the mind – are best couched in a style that conveys something of the uncertainty of the mental process and not just its neatly packaged conclusions.” (p. 45)

Turning my attention to my physical copy of Illeris' book published in 1978 on my table, the faded reddish cover is ripped and hinges desperately to the spine. The difference in saturation on the front and back cover suggests the book has spent ample time facing front-up in the sun. The title, *Problemorientering og deltagerstyring – oplæg til en alternativ didaktik* is printed about two-thirds from the tail, around the golden ratio. Two-thirds down from the head, an arrow points to the right, inviting the reader to open the book. Opening the book reveals a quite prevalent coffee stain almost as if a previous reader at some point became so startled the coffee mug dropped in excitement or was spat out in cartoonish fashion, (or disappointment – the book may provide an outline for an alternative pedagogy, while it simultaneously is surprisingly complaisant to capitalist society and thinking. And it seems that Illeris (1974/1978) anticipated such critique as he towards the end of the draft has a two-page section called 'For the people or profit?' - and subsequently, addressed the predicted critique in the introduction to his book from 1981). I think Tanizaki would have appreciated this slightly worn and faded edition of the book.

Education and qualifications

The purpose of Illeris' draft is to develop and sustain a critical didactic based on societal and psychological conditions while guiding practitioners. Didactic does not mean patronizing or moralizing, but is used as a direct translation of the northern European Didaktik. For readability and flow I use *didactic* (for more on the actual differences between German Didaktik and Anglo-Saxon curriculum see Gudem & Hopmann, 1998).

The draft can be divided into three general parts: contemporary societal conditions and challenges and pedagogical and psychological theories, a practical guide for planning problem-oriented and participant-directed education, and completion of problem-oriented and participant-directed education. The three parts are wrapped by an introduction framing a perceived

instrumentalisation of didactic, and a short final chapter briefly outlining societal warrants for Illeris' draft with a very pragmatic approach. I will focus on the first half of the introduction wrapper: the first half of chapter one. Not that other parts are irrelevant, but I find the rationales for educational change and reform most interesting as they seem so persisting.

A central argument found in the first pages of the draft is descriptions of an instrumentalised didactic, concerned mostly with transmission and methods of teaching; state-induced ideological manifestations, often in internal conflict, and not subject to further inquiry. Illeris argues that political conditions and structures affecting education should be part of a critical and emancipatory didactic and outlines a solution to an educational crisis reminiscent and recurrent challenges associated with education - the alignment with changes in means of production, technology, and economy. These challenges are not new but are ready allies when education requires reform (see for instance Callahan, 1964 and Labaree, 2008). Unlike modern panaceas, additional literacies are not even mentioned, but rather the whole structure of education ought to be changed to keep up with an accelerating society, furthermore, in Illeris' draft even disciplines are no longer a suitable structuring mechanism for education – outdated and for traditionalist only (perhaps even Luddites). Instead, education should be oriented towards problems transcending disciplinary boundaries and individual capabilities, emphasising project-based group work (Illeris, 1974/1978, 1981).

While societal challenges and psychological factors are pivotal for changing education, the purpose and societal function remain – qualification of the prospective labourer (p. 30). However, educational qualifications during feudalism were relatively different than the flexible qualifications demanded by modern society (denoted as a unified entity with agency). Qualification as a singular concept is a bit too all-encompassing, and drawing on Masuch (in Illeris, 1974/1978, p. 30-53), Illeris presents three categories, each concerning different skills for sustaining and developing capitalist society. The first, *skills-related qualifications* are those necessary in a labour process which can be defined by the processes, tools, or machines part of the labour process. This qualification category can be further divided into general skills not defined by the parts of the labour process, and special skills needed for specific occupations (p. 33-34).

The second category was an unexpected one when I first read Illeris' draft – remember counterculture, youth rebellion, and whatnot: adaptive qualifications that are general and common across all systems within a society, address the intensity of labour, diligence, and tenaciousness. Furthermore, obedience and positive dispositions towards existing conditions for work and

society are also a part of the adaptive qualifications: “These [“negative” qualifications] mean that one willingly and obedient do what one has been told to do to the best of one’s abilities” (p. 34) (my own translation, *told* does not quite capture the Danish *bliver sat til* in the original, but captures somewhat the external force putting someone to work). The last aspect of the adaptive category is those qualifications that suppress the workers’ apathy and indifference which can harm the activities of the business (the rate of profit, Illeris notes).

The third and last category of qualifications are the creative ones necessary for the ongoing development of a capitalist society. Illeris splits these into two subcategories, one societal emphasising the increased efficiency in the means and organisation of production requiring qualifications to do scientific and innovative work. For the individual this entails qualifications for continued personal renewal, partake in new functions, and to collaborate. The creative qualifications are exemplified in attributes such as critical thinking, independence, openness, creativity, and constructive collaboration (p. 35). The general, acceptable adaptational and creative qualifications are, however, not to be imagined as insulated parts but as a harmonious triad represented as a singular qualification requirement in a modern, highly industrialised society (p. 43).

It is in the latter category, the creative qualifications are charged with possibilities for societal changes. Illeris notes a tension between the adaptable and creative qualifications, where the former fundamentally delves into complacency with the existing society, and the latter traits to transcend it – not for the sake of leftist or progressive demands, but for the sake of necessity. Illeris almost foreshadows Rosa’s (2015) dynamic stabilisation, that is when a modern society in its reproduction requires growth, innovation, and acceleration to maintain status quo. The tension outlined in Illeris’ draft poses dilemmas for the “system” – the development of the potentially subversive creative qualification within the existing boundaries defined by the system. The changes in educational structures, and the subsequent success, are then a carefully choreographed dance, balancing the existing while trying to change it within the already confined space. Illeris quotes Masuch (pp. 52-53) and introduces an emancipatory (or liberating) perspective to education, but this is only possible where the ruling parties and pedagogy share a common interest. So, what does emancipation truly mean? To be rebellious – but only if it is aligned with the values of those in charge? Illeris continues, and closes the section concerning societal conditions with an important statement – in my reading almost a careful warning to those who might have forgotten: educational change must correspond to the societal demands of education, and if “*the educated in these fields* [the three categories of qualification] *do not perform as well as the traditional*

educational products, the changes have not only lost their impact, but also the warrant for their existence" (p. 53). Emancipation and liberation for the product of education – a qualified graduate.

The next section of the chapter continues with the pedagogical and psychological warrant for the following two chapters on implementation, planning, and completion. For a fuller summary and analysis of these sections, I recommend Sørensen (2023) recent reading of Illeris' draft and Clausen (2023) for a recent overview of pertinent literature and development of self-directed learning, which in my reading runs as a theoretical backbone throughout Illeris' draft. In this vein, though Dewey has since gained a prominent place in the literature concerning PBL, there is very little Dewey in Illeris' draft. The only reference is to Dewey's small pamphlet *The Child and the Curriculum* from 1902.

So, my fellow commuter, should you read Illeris' draft?

YES, GET ON WITH IT! Why? If you like me never have been part of a youth revolt and reforming pedagogy, it brings the notion of rebellious thinking into the safe confinements of contemporary hegemony and demands for education – and not that much seems to have changed when it comes to why educational institutions must change every so often. It surprised me that many of the current terms and concepts about education are already found in Illeris' draft from 1974/1978 – learning to learn, the basis of lifelong learning, employability-qualifications spiced with dangerous creativity (*if allowed that is, and it doesn't disrupt business*). Go on, get on with the draft, you won't be disappointed. You might even spit your coffee out.

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¹ When I write Illeris with no reference, I reference the 1978 edition of *Problemløsnings og deltagerstyring – oplæg til en alternativ didaktik* [problem-orientation and participant-direction – a draft for an alternative didactic]. The same is the case when I write *the draft, Illeris' draft*.