Criticism of the '*Learnification*' Paradigm in Higher Education in Gert Biesta's Works: A Viewpoint Paper

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Purpose: This is a brief viewpoint paper that presents arguments and contra-arguments related to the dominant 'learnification' paradigm in higher education based on Gert Biesta's selected works. I want to advocate and share my views on issues that are contemporary, important, exciting, and helpful to others in higher education.

Study design/methodology/approach: The methodology is a combination of a deep and critical analysis of Gert Biesta's views on the dangers of the widespread 'learnification' paradigm in education and the personal views of the authors. To increase the credibility, this approach requires to state the positionality of the author.

Findings: The criticism focuses on six areas, namely on (1) the purpose of education, (2) learning, (3) teaching, (4) the role of the students, (5) the role of the teachers, and (6) the curriculum, didactics, and pedagogy.

Originality/value: I believe that this viewpoint paper is a modest contribution to the recent discourses and critical debates in education and it will generate further discourses about 'learnification'.

Introduction

Trends in higher education

Higher education and the university experience turbulent times. Magnússon and Rytzler (2022, pp. 15–31) identify four main paradigms of higher education:

1. *Education becomes private good* – shift from public good to private good; while higher education receives public funding, there are the individuals who benefit from their education; higher education raises the employability of individuals; knowledge becomes private good.
2. *Marketization/commodification of higher education* – shift towards business principles, education is based on business principles (i.e., quality measures, university rankings, the focus of mass-education, competition between universities, the importance of university branding and marketing, certificates have a price, students pay for a number of credits.
3. *Educationalization* – shift towards social and political problem solving; education focuses on solving political and social problems and crises, and the aim is to develop good citizens for the future (inclusion, equality, justice, and moral values).
4. *Learnification* – shift from teaching to learning, education focuses on learning outcomes, measuring skills, knowledge, and competencies of students, the role of teaching becomes secondary to learning.

According to Biesta (2006, pp. 17–19, 2010, pp. 17–18), there are four major trends that caused the rise of the new language of learning, i.e., 'learnification' of education: (1) New theories of learning – constructivist theories, sociocultural theories – learning has become central in educational discourses; (2) Postmodernism – questioning that educators can liberate and emancipate their students by communicating critical thinking and rationality; (3) The rise of adult learning – formal and informal forms of individual learning are growing; and (4) Decline of the welfare state – rise of the market economy, state control of educational protocols, learners become consumers, educators become providers.

"'Learnification' refers to the transformation of the vocabulary used to talk about education into one of 'learning' and 'learners'" (Biesta, 2010, p. 18). The two problems of the new language of learning are: (1) 'learning' is an individualistic concept – education, however, implies a relationship; (2) 'learning' is a process term – it does not say about the content (what to learn) and direction (for what purpose) of learning. Therefore, "the language of learning is *insufficient* as an educational language" (Biesta, 2017, p. 27) because it ignores the content (what to learn) and the purpose (for what to learn) of education.

This viewpoint paper aims to present the main assumptions of the dominating 'learnification' paradigm in educational discourses and practice, and to elaborate the criticism of it based on Gert Biesta's works. In addition, I want to advocate and share my own views on issues that are contemporary, important, exciting, and might be helpful to others in higher education.

Positionality of the author

In viewpoint papers, to increase the credibility of the findings, it is important to position the authors. The positionality of authors is also important because being an insider or an outsider practitioner in higher education has an impact on the results, findings, interpretations, and overall, credibility or internal validity, transferability or external validity, reliability or dependability, and authenticity. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013, in Holmes, 2020, p. 3), there are the following three main ways how researchers/authors may identify and develop their positionality: to the topic, to the participants, and to the context (place, space, time).

How do I position myself?

During my more than two decades teaching in higher education, I realized the urgent need not only for knowledge transfer and focus on learning in education but, more importantly, for caring, for fostering the emancipatory becoming of students, for supporting their lifeworld becoming. During the last five years, I have become highly interested in research topics related to wisdom and practical wisdom. Educating for wisdom will be the most important topic in education because of the abundance of data, information, and knowledge. The key for us educators will be how we can inspire our students, how we can become role models for them, how we can foster their moral and ethical values in their own decisions and actions for the benefit of the common good, and how we could help them to live a flourishing life.

Methodology

This is a viewpoint paper. According to Huang (2020, p. 115), viewpoint papers "are relatively short, flexible in style, and can serve different purposes". My purpose was to direct teachers' and other educational practitioners' attention to a dominating paradigm and its dangers in higher education. Discussing arguments pro and contra of the widespread 'learnification' paradigm is a contemporary, important, and exciting topic. Therefore, this paper focuses only on one author's books and on the opinions of the author of this paper, who has over two decades of experience as a practitioner in Finnish higher education. I decided to focus on Biesta's works because he is a leading educational philosopher whose views are important for educators. The five books of Biesta (2006, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2022) were selected because they cover over 15 years, which is a long time in 21st-century education. The methodology is a deep and critical analysis of Gert Biesta's views on the dangers of the widespread 'learnification' paradigm in education.

Structure of the paper

This paper has three main sections. In the Introduction, I presented the four emerging trends in higher education, the focus of this paper on 'learnification', my positionality as an educational

practitioner, and the methodology as a viewpoint paper. Next, before the Conclusion section, I demonstrated Biesta's criticism on six areas of the 'learnification' paradigm, namely on the purpose of education, learning, teaching, the role of the students, the role of the teachers, and curriculum, didactics, and pedagogy with my own views about 'learninfication'.

Biesta's criticism of the 'learnification' paradigm

Criticism of the purpose of education

The questions of what the university is and what the purpose of education is would need more discussion. According to Magnússon and Rytzler (2022), "the university can be understood as a specific way of arranging, teaching, and researching knowledge, that in a way extends the function of an adult generation that gradually introduces the world to the young. […] higher education extends the opportunities for students, teachers, and researchers to explore and to take part of this world" (Magnússon & Rytzler, 2022, p. 81). The philosopher Russell (1956) strongly believed that wisdom can be taught, and teaching wisdom should be one of the aims of education. Already in the mid-fifties, he argued that "the world needs wisdom as it has never needed it before, and if knowledge continues to increase, the world will need wisdom in the future even more than it does now" (Russell, 1956, p. 177). Others (e.g., Jakubik, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2023; Jakubik et al., 2023; Müürsepp & Jakubik, 2022) argue that there is a new paradigm emerging in education, where cultivating practical wisdom is important to foster students' lifeworld becoming, and where students' capabilities will be enhanced for work and for life.

Based on the language of 'learnification', the purpose of education is to provide learning opportunities and experiences to students. Student learning, student satisfaction, and student experience are at the centre (satisfying customers) of education. Education becomes a commodity, becomes an economic transaction between teacher and students, students (consumers) demand and teachers (providers) supply (neoliberalism). Education should give learners 'value for money'. Furthermore, 'learnification' assumes that students know their needs, they know what they want to learn before they enter education. Advocates of 'learnification' also claim that education is socialization, inclusion, discipline, moral training, and adaptation. The main role of education in the 'learnification' paradigm is production of the rational autonomous person, production of democratic citizens, and reproduction of the existing status quo (conservation of culture, traditions).

Biesta has strong criticism against the language of 'learnification'. According to him, "a language of learning makes it particularly difficult to grapple with questions of purpose- and also with questions of content and relationships" (Biesta, 2010, p. 5). In many of his books, Biesta declares that "education should always be concerned with and oriented towards three domains of purpose – qualification, socialization, and subjectification" (Biesta, 2022, p. 60). The three domains of education should be: qualification (i.e., knowledge, skills, competencies), socialization (i.e., cultural traditions and practices), and subjectification as an existential dimension (Biesta, 2010, pp. 19–21; Biesta, 2013, p. 64; Biesta 2022, pp. 40–57).

He opposes education as the cultivation of human beings because, in his view, this paradigm treats the person as an object. He argues that the 'I' is not the result of a process of cultivation, but education should encourage "the self to be a self … not to walk away from itself" (Biesta, 2022, p. 33). For him, "educational questions are fundamentally *existential* questions" (Biesta, 2022, p. 9) and "education should always be aimed at enhancing the ability of pupils and students to 'enact' their own 'subject-ness'" (Biesta, 2022, p. 2). The purpose of education "is to give the new generation a fair chance at their existence as subjects, 'in' and 'with' the world" (Biesta, 2022, p. 13).

In brief, the main task of education, according to Biesta (2017, p. 4), is to raise "the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way" as an individual, emancipated and free being. He does not deny the importance of knowledge, learning, and comprehension, but for him, the primary purpose of education should be emancipation. Biesta argues that the main educational question is how education can contribute to the freedom of the human subject. Education needs to be a process through which the relationship of equality develops between the teacher and the student (Biesta, 2013, pp. 77–99). Education is not only about learning but rather it is about "using one's intelligence under the assumption of the equality of intelligence" (Biesta, 2013, p. 94).

Criticism of learning

There are different approaches and assumptions about learning (Jakubik, 2021) and about the future of learning (Prince et al., 2018). These also suggest that the language of learning has become the dominant discourse and practice in education. Assumptions about learning, according to the 'learnification' paradigm, are that learning happens when students construct knowledge of their own (constructivist approach), learners have to make up their own minds and come to their own understandings (individualistic approach), students should take responsibility for their own learning, lifelong learning, life-wise learning, self-learning, adult learning, and it is possible to measure the educational/learning outcomes.

On the contrary, Biesta argues that the language of learning ignores the content (what) and the purpose (for what) of learning (Biesta, 2017): "Nowadays there is simply too much talk about learning and too little talk about what learning is supposed to be *for* … about the end of learning" (Biesta, 2010, p. 127). According to him, 'learnification' is "the shift from teaching to learning is the result of the constructivist theories of learning and social-cultural approaches to education" (Biesta, 2022, p. 69; Biesta, 2017, pp. 27-29). He worries that "the language of learning that has become so dominant in recent times has actually made it more difficult to ask questions about what good education might look like" (Biesta, 2010, p. viii).

Biesta believes that education cannot be reduced to learning; education is more than learning, "learning is the last thing that educators should be concerned about … learning is something natural, something we can *not* do" (Biesta, 2013, p.59) because learning might happen or not happen during education, "Learning is going on with or without education" (Biesta, 2022, p. 84), learning is invisible, it is the "unknown element in the educational equation" (Biesta, 2022, p. 82).

He argues that "learning needs content, direction (relationships), and purpose (reason) (Biesta, 2013, p. 63), "While education *is* visible because it is a social act, learning is not" (Biesta, 2022, p. 83). Biesta is also against the measurement of the learning outcomes because what good education is "can never be answered by the outcomes of measurement" (Biesta, 2010, p. 128). His view is that "there is more to life than learning, which is an important reason why education should not be confined to learning … and why there should not be a blanket duty to keep on learning throughout one's life" (Biesta, 2022, p. 43).

Briefly, I agree with Biesta that "the term "learning" is actually an empty process term which doesn't say much – if anything at all – about what the learning is *about* or what it is *for*. Yet these questions are crucial for education because the point of education is never that students simply learn – they can do that anywhere, including, nowadays, on the internet – but that they learn *something*, that they learn it *for a reason*, and that they learn it *from someone*. A key problem with the language of learning is that it tends to make these questions – about educational content, purpose, and relationships – invisible, or assumes that the answer to these questions is already clear and decided upon" (Biesta, 2022, p. 44).

Criticism of teaching

The 'learnification' paradigm assumes that teaching and teachers are on the sidelines. Teaching is regarded as facilitating the learning process of the students, and "the role of a teacher has become more that of a facilitator than of a source of knowledge and wisdom" (Biesta, 2010, p. 3). 'Learnification' manifests "in the redefinition of teaching as the facilitation of learning and of education as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences" (Biesta, 2010, p. 17).

On the contrary, Biesta views teaching as "interruption, suspension, and sustenance (nourishment)" (Biesta, 2017, pp. 17-19). He points out that teaching is essential for education (Biesta, 2017); it is "a necessary component of education" (Biesta, 2013, p. 44) because it is not only about the transfer of knowledge but also redirects students' attention (Biesta, 2022, pp. 75–89). For him, teaching "is not only about learning" (Biesta, 2017, pp. 40–43); it is not about the control of the learning process, and it is not about power. He strongly expresses that "There is a need for rediscovery of teaching, giving teaching back to education "learning is *accidental* to education, teaching … is *essential* to education" (Biesta, 2017, pp. 96–98; Biesta 2022, p. 62). Teaching is a nourishment, "we should focus on the ways in which the new beginning of each and every individual can 'come into presence' (Biesta, 2006, p. 9). He argues that "the educational work educators do with "the children" is interested in their existence as subjects of their own life. The educational work of educators is therefore orientated towards the *freedom* of those being educated, bearing in mind that this is not the freedom just to do what one wants to do, but grown-up freedom in and with the world" (Biesta, 2022, p. 58).

He maintains that "the opposition between "traditional" and "progressive" education, where the first is about teachers and teaching and the second about learners and learning is simplistic and misleading and that there is a *need for a rediscovery of teaching* … in which teaching is reconnected to progressive agendas and ambitions, rather than only thought of in terms of power and control" (Biesta, 2022, p. 43, emphasis added), he writes "our aim is to give teaching back to education" (Biesta, 2013, p. 58). "To engage in *educational* relationships, to be a teacher or to *be* an educator, therefore implies a responsibility for something (or better, someone) that we do not know and cannot know" (i.e., responsibility without knowledge) (Biesta, 2006, p. 30). For Biesta teaching is an "act of gift giving" (Biesta, 2013, p. 44). He warns us that "if we give up on the idea that teachers have something to teach and make them into facilitators of learning, we do, in a sense, give up on the very idea of education" (Biesta, 2013, p. 46).

To sum it up, the strong discourse about learning in education diminished the role of teaching and the teacher. Biesta claims that learning is only one of the possibilities for human beings. He strongly argues that "the language of learning is *insufficient* as an educational language" because the educational language "has to pay attention to questions of *content*, *purpose*, and *relationships*" (Biesta, 2017, pp. 27 and 28). Similarly, Magnússon and Rytzler (2022), agreeing with Biesta, write that teaching needs to be considered "a conceptually and historically multi-layered endeavour" (2022, p. 73). They refer to Nordenbo (2002), whose educational theory builds on three concepts: *Erzieung* (education), *Unterricht* (teaching), and *Bildung* (formation). According to Nordenbo, teaching includes both education and formation.

Criticism of the role of the student

The 'learnification' paradigm assumes that the learner is in the centre of education (student-centred education), the students are customers who want value for money, and the learner knows what she/he wants to know and why they want to learn it. In learning-centred education, students should take responsibility for their own learning, and they must become proactive, autonomous, and willing to continuously renew their knowledge.

The counterarguments by Biesta are what it means to be human can be understood only by engaging in education (he refers to Kant) and that students are equal partners in education. He believes that "the questions about the content and purpose of learning should first of all be seen as important educational questions … and not simply as questions of individual preference" (Biesta, 2006, p. 23). According to him, "the student is not a student-consumer whose needs need to be met in the most effective way, but a student who is open to take the gift of teaching, a student who can welcome the unwelcome, a student who does not limit himself or herself to the task of learning from the teacher but is open to the possibility of being taught" (Biesta, 2013, p. 58).

In brief, while the 'learnification' discourse and practice placed the needs of the student at the centre of education, it has diminished the role of teaching and the teacher in educational work. One problem with treating the student as a 'customer' or 'consumer' who knows what he or she wants to learn and who pays for his or her education is that this assumption ruins the main purpose of being educated, to learn something new, something unexpected, that could not have been defined or imagined before engaging with education. The other problem is that 'learnification' assumes that the teacher is who knows, and the student is who does not yet know. It assumes that in the student-teacher relationship, the teacher is a subject, and the student is an object during the education.

Criticism of the role of the teacher

In the 'learnification' paradigm the assumptions about the role of the teacher are that teachers should not teach, but instead facilitate the learning process of their students. It means that the teacher becomes a facilitator and mentor, the teacher becomes invisible, and the teacher takes the role of a coach, like a manager in business. In 'learnification', "teachers have become near invisible, having been much displaced by curriculum managers and designers, digital experts, learning developers, student mentors and so forth" (Barnett, 2022, p. 109). Another assumption is that the teacher is a 'midwife' and releases the rational potential of the students.

Biesta's counterarguments are that "the teacher as a "facilitator of learning," misconstrues the complexities of educational relationships and the work of the teacher in such relationships (Biesta, 2022, p. 44). "The role of the educator in all this is not that of a technician or a midwife but has to be understood in terms of a responsibility for the 'coming into the world' of unique, singular beings, and a *responsibility for the world as a world of plurality and difference*" (Biesta, 2006, pp. 9-10, emphasis added). The teacher is "someone who, in the most general sense, brings something new to the educational situation, something that was not already there" (Biesta, 2013, p. 44). Teachers "always have an orientation toward their students' independence and emancipation" (Biesta, 2010, p. 130) and rationality cannot be a measure of humanity (Biesta, 2006, p. 9).

In conclusion, the teacher's role and tasks are marginalized by the language of 'learninfication'. Biesta (2017) calls it an 'educational lie'. He writes: "To suggest that education is just about supporting the child's development, just about letting each student develop their talents and reach their full potential, is, therefore, an educational lie – a lie that is not only misleading towards children and students but also misleading as a vocabulary for educators to describe their task and even understand what it actually is" (Biesta, 2017, pp. 17–18).

Criticism of curriculum, didactics, and pedagogy

The 'learnification' paradigm assumes that the curriculum has predefined topics, predefined learning objectives in course descriptions, and predefined measurable skills, knowledge, and

competencies. It also assumes that measuring skills, knowledge, and competencies leads to expected outcomes in education.

On the contrary, Biesta claims that teaching has three gifts: (1) being given what you did not ask for (curriculum), i.e., education should give students what they did not ask for, it should give students more, (2) double truth giving (didactics) that is giving students the conditions of recognizing it as truth, not only giving them knowledge, and (3) being given yourself (pedagogy) which is the existential domain of education. He argues that the curriculum should not be a content that needs to be acquired but a curriculum "as the practice that allows for particular responses" (Biesta, 2006, p. 28)

To sum it up, Biesta (2006, 2013) strongly criticizes predefined learning objectives and measurements of skills, knowledge, and competencies. He writes that the "philosophy of education must always make place for that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility, that which transcends the realm of the possible" (Biesta, 2013, p. 52). Similarly, Magnússon and Rytzler (2022) are against measuring the efficiency of university education. They argue that "the pedagogical role of the university … must go *beyond* measuring the proportion of graduates that have jobs two years after finishing their degrees" … it "must take the complexity of the university into account, and it must respect both national, regional, and scientific context within which individual practitioners work" (Magnússon & Rytzler, 2022, p. ix, emphasis added).

Conclusion

My aim with this brief viewpoint paper was to present arguments and counterarguments related to the dominant 'learnification' paradigm in education. Furthermore, I wanted to advocate and share my own views on issues that are contemporary, important, exciting, and might be helpful to others in higher education.

This study was built on the educational philosopher Gert Biesta's selected works. I believe that this paper is a modest contribution to the discourses and critical debates about the purpose of education, learning, teaching, the role of the students, the role of the teachers, and curriculum, didactics, and pedagogy in higher education. I believe that the implications of the paper will be in generating more debates and different views about the widespread 'learnification' paradigm in education.

Furthermore, I think that this paper contributes to Stoller and Kramer's five propositions about the philosophy of higher education. They summarize their main propositions as (1) a philosophy must view higher education as an *institutional* type, accounting both for its distinctive elements and its organizational complexities; (2) a philosophy of higher education must build on the *complex network* of actors and cultures in the system; (3) a philosophy of higher education advances a *cohesive and critical* imaginary for higher education in relationship to various, social, political, economic, and ethical contexts and concerns; (4) a philosophy of higher education must develop a robust account of *teaching, learning, and knowing*; and finally (5) a philosophy of higher education must advance a *theoretical discourse* that appropriately denotes its practices and its aims (Stoller & Kramer, 2018, pp. 15–18, emphases added). I strongly hope that this paper will generate further discussions and arguments for and against the widespread 'learnification' paradigm in higher education.

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