

This thematic issue reflects some discussions of the study-circle in Nordic Summer University (NSU): *Futures of Education, Cultural Diversity, Imaginations and Collective Transformations in Time of the Anthropocene (2021-2023)*.

The study-circle appeared as a synthesis of two previous circles: *Learning and Bildung in Times of Globalisation* and *Patterns of Dysfunction in Contemporary Democracies; Impact on Human Rights and Governance*.

This diverse assembly of themes has proven fruitful for the six symposia held throughout the three years. What appears as a diversity that could make one wonder about the common ground for discussion has demonstrated the advantages of diversity and cross-disciplinary discussions. Cultural diversity, mentioned in the title of the circle, has been represented through the variety of the participants' backgrounds although not more diverse than coming from humanistic disciplines in a Western tradition.

Anyone familiar with current academia knows that disciplinary diversity is often accompanied with insurmountable gaps of communication. Personal interests and institutional boundaries often frame academic work and they become contributions to existing discourses and academic fields where one is credited for adding to the institutionalized specialization rather than pursuing the matter [*die Sache*] – and the matter is not colleagues' arguments but whether we understand the matter and if colleagues from a different field offer new and enriching perspectives.

However, fruitful exchanges across disciplines do happen like we experienced it at our symposia in NSU. Crossing disciplines is a hallmark of NSU, along with being rooted in Nordic traditions and geographical relation to the Nordic-Baltic region. Since its start in 1950, NSU has hosted numerous research groups that find a sanctuary outside the institutional norms and restrictions with their politicized research agendas protecting disciplinary territories. In the spirit of the 19th century folk-high schools it enables participants to meet and share knowledge in an environment of curiosity for what others from other scholarly fields can tell. Based on voluntary work and ideals of democracy, including also the judgement of scientific activities exercised by its community of scholars, it maintains ideals of an enlightenment culture and Nordic egalitarianism. Without owning any facilities and without employees it is a nomadic university where all spending becomes a distribution of knowledge, building of scholarly contacts and networks, and a display of what Nordic-Baltic democratic practice is.

The first two years of the circle's existence were in times of Covid, and the symposia were held online. In the last year it was possible to meet in Denmark and Lithuania.

With a view to the Anthropocene as the theme for the circle, one could think of online meetings as positive – they saved much travel. However, while taking advantage of online options enabling one to attend events it would otherwise have been impossible to come to due to time and travel, we have also been reminded of how much the actual presence with other participants matter to what one brings home from attending different events. The informal chats in the coffee breaks that we have always known to be a large part of attending such events are not quite the same online – not to mention the drinks and dinners. Online symposia could, with a view to the educational theme, have been an occasion for asking what we have learned, or did not learn, from this format because we can expect online activities to be a component in future education and meetings. However, the circle pursued the themes originally announced, they are enlisted at the bottom, although the online format could have been included as an additional theme regarding futures of education.

Education is with a view to the future – to enable and empower others, whether children or adults, so they can act skillfully also tomorrow. We now face a future where climate, environmental, and biodiversity crises have consequences we cannot foresee. To learn to act in a radically different world is not to be better trained in what we do today, but to learn to be able to think and act differently because different conditions and situations require different answers.

One could say that the Anthropocene denotes a state of emergency that suspends any other agenda. At this point we can set aside whether the Anthropocene is a problematic term; here it is only used to refer to the age in which activities of human origin change the world. However, while publishing this issue the suggestion of using the Anthropocene as an official epoch in Earth's geological timeline has been rejected by the International Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, a subcommittee of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, although the decision is currently contested (Witze 2024). Whether the Anthropocene is definitively rejected as a relevant concept for geologists or not, it is nonetheless important to notice that it has also led to new developments in so-called 'environmental humanities' (including education), which has taken the Anthropocene as a fruitful starting point (more perhaps than has been the case with for example the notion of sustainable development) for humanistic reflections on the environmental crisis, while also discussing the notion of the Anthropocene from various critical perspectives. A crucial point is that one is aware of how general statements regarding activities of human origin obscure the complexities of reality – an undifferentiated reference to 'human' is either too general to

say anything, or it subscribes to a classical strategy of power that reduces differences to one, i.e. to one's own perspective.

Neglected are questions such as whether it makes sense to refer to humans as such or if we must refer to specific forms of human activities such as unlimited production and consumption.

Confronted with an emergency, an obvious question is what to do. However, it requires a clear idea of the emergency. Presumably, the participants in the symposia, and probably the majority of those who may read this journal issue, share an understanding of the emergency caused by climate, biodiversity and environmental crises. For others it may not be as clear a case because the scale and abstraction of knowledge and events obscure the emergency. It is perhaps not wrong to compare this to the logic of small escalating steps in political debates, where limits to what can be said are slowly pushed until one is witnessing discourses that at the beginning were unthinkable. Similarly to how voices at the beginning raising moral concerns were heard and recognized but not acted on because indecency did not seem to be an urgent matter, scientific voices since the last third of the 20th century, have been noticed but not heard as urgent enough to act on. When norms are eroded, we find it difficult, at the verge of impossible, to restore them; however, changes are possible. At this point, the parallel collapses because when normality regarding climate and ecology has eroded we pass tipping points and the process is irreversible. Changed norms call for acting, whether restorative or revolutionary; but passing a tipping point is fatal. Perhaps tipping points appear abstract to many, but warning signals such as floods, heatwaves, extinction of species, and desertification are already concrete realities. Because we try to meet these catastrophes with restoring projects a false belief that we can handle future changes as well can appear. However, these catastrophes are only symptoms. When a tipping point is passed there is no restoration, only adaptation to a new reality. The emergency of today is that a tipping point can be passed any day, and the reality will from then on be a radically different one.

Perhaps the reader of this issue is in the situation of dealing with consequences and may rightly ask: why did we not act on the knowledge we had?

What concrete acts the symposia participants and the authors of this issue are engaged in, is a matter for their conscience. Nevertheless, it is not without interest to ask what kind of considerations we make, at least we who are fully aware of the urgency of the matter. Such an awareness is inevitably related to questions of co-responsibility and possible actions. Is it a matter of individual acting, which may seem abstract in a global perspective as it seems to

matter nothing in the large perspective? Is it a matter of collective acting which calls for political interventions, which seems insufficient in the light of the multiple interests intervening with the political institutions formed for this purpose – like the Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting annually since 1995? Is it somewhere in between where individuals organize to create alternatives or take up political actions of civil disobedience and resistance?

While this points at political actions, an academic contribution must be one of reflecting on what these situations and options imply to inform and establish a foundation for insightful discourse and practice. One such knowledge component concerns how to prepare for the future and what skills will be necessary for responding to future challenges, i.e. questions of future education.

Education has to do with a change of position in the world, where one has been led or guided through encounters that enables one to meet new situations and become competent to deal with them. A condition for such change of position is that one does not believe to be caught in a vicious circle of conflicts and consequently paralyzed. A wakening of awareness may be a first and necessary step in enabling one to de- and reconstruct a reality wherein the prevalent idea of finding a new position is one of empowerment to take control of the environment. Perhaps power is falsely believed to be a matter of enforcing control over something while instead it is to acknowledge the relations one is embedded in and the capability of taking on the responsibility one is given.

In that sense, these cultures based on literacy have a millennia long tradition of narratives interpreting the human-nature relation including what both human and nature mean.

Obviously, there are large variations in interpretations in these cultures from the Mediterranean via Euphrates and Tigris to the Indus and Ganges rivers – variations between the Homeric epics, Gilgamesh and the Upanishads – even though they are related to each other throughout centuries of exchanges and conflicting separations. Nevertheless, it may be possible to say they show a common understanding of nature representing what they understand to be a global and divine order, and humans struggling with understanding how they fit into this order. This order can appear conflicting from the human perspective, when different powers such as deities, spirits, semi-gods etc. have their share in both positions, interests and functions in the world. Another conflict can appear between the different interpretations that form cultural differences because each of them are often accompanied by the idea that they are the best interpretation of the world which easily leads to cultural chauvinism. In the recent, at least six, centuries, we find in many cultural forms also an

increasingly chauvinist relation to nature that serves still less as moral guidance enabling still more human-centered views – or one could also say more nature-forgetful views – that also transform the educational aspect of narratives into an extreme and in a contemporary Western context fairly common form of becoming entertaining experiences. It is, therefore, important to keep in mind how narratives and the performance of them in storytelling, theater, images, processions, and play, were participatory and engaging for the sake of repositioning the participants in the world. Narratives were not for informing about the world as if they were pre-scientific explanations with additional emotional means. They were not for informing about things and actions, but for what to do and how to do it, for enabling active participation. Institutionalized boundaries since the 19th century have created a specialization of knowledge about different fields often at the price of understanding how the knowledge is integrated into a larger picture of the world one lives in. A larger picture has been seen as an irrelevant question for the specialist – a development that may be convenient for development of expertise but one that is also politically convenient for controlling independent interests that are concerned with protecting their independence in competition with colleagues in search for knowledge because these colleagues become also competitors in search for funding.

One does not become educated by having access to sources of information; one must also understand what to do with the information. It is essentially also to know what matters, and this requires a perspective on the matter. It matters for the result of completing the jigsaw puzzle to find the missing piece, but the question is if it really matters to complete it. If education matters for the future, it becomes also of vital importance to discuss what we educate for. Is that to acquire more specific competences to enable making a career in a technical civilization where we invent still more complex means for producing new goods for consumption? Of course, one can argue we urgently need technological development to maintain a growing level of material wealth that includes all global citizens and the task is then set: find more energy efficient means based on circulating what has already been brought into the circle of production and consumption. It is urgent, and time is short. But perhaps we also need to take time off and ask if our understanding of a meaningful life is one of being a consumer. A question is whether education for the future is about the acquisition of better technical competences to fill an existing life-form with more quality products, or if it is a perspective on what a meaningful existence is for which we may need more quality time.

It is possible we have run out of time confronted with environmental crises, which does not

mean we have no time left for living, only that we must adjust to radically different conditions of living. But even if time is not out, a radical change of living is required, and with it also a different educational agenda which implies also a discussion of what this educational agenda is. This thematic issue does not answer these questions but offers a small contribution to discussing them.

#### Themes for the study-circle 2021-2023

1. Education and Nature as the Other in the Anthropocene
2. Education and the Human Other in the Anthropocene
3. Education and the Technological Other in the Anthropocene
4. Imagining the Future - Traditions and Transformations
5. Diversity, Transformation, and the Future
6. Action-oriented Change - Potentialities for Sustainability

#### Reference:

Witze, Alexandra. 2024. "Geologists reject the Anthropocene as Earth's new epoch - after 15 years of debate", *Nature* 627, 249-250. DOI:10.1038/d41586-024-00675-8

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