

# Co-Existence and Co-Operation: The Two-Dimensional Conception of Education

J. Aspelin

Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, SE-205 06 Malmö, Sweden

---

**Abstract** The expanding global discourse on education is built on the concept of individualism. One emerging direction in educational theory that challenges this discourse is relational pedagogy. This article aims to discuss some characteristic aspects of relational pedagogy, and thereby proposing a theoretical course in the field. By comparing Kenneth Gergen's and Martin Buber's relational conceptions, the article argues that relational pedagogy could/should be characterized by a distinction between two fundamental types of relationships, tentatively labeled co-existence and co-operation. This distinction is proposed to be significant for relational pedagogy to become a trustworthy alternative not only to the individualistic but also to the collectivist conception of education

**Keywords** Relational Pedagogy, Buber, Gergen, Co-action, Co-operation, Co-existence

---

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades the process of globalization has led to a growing competition between school systems and an increased focus on standardized knowledge tests. At the national level – influenced by extensive international surveys such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS – countries have strived for control over their relative level of knowledge by placing emphasis on instruments such as tests, evaluations, assessments and inspections. Interventions are justified by the notion that high performances, when measured in these ways, are indications of a successful educational system and of a generally competitive nation. If a country's students perform well in various tests, education is assumed to be of high quality. Another underlying assumption is that the most important aspects of education are possible to objectify. Yet another assumption is that the goal of education is synonymous with individual students' academic achievement. From this perspective, the overall aim of education is to produce high-performing, autonomous and rational individuals. Thus, the model is built on an individualistic conception of education and learning (cf. Biesta, [7]).

The described model, which Aspelin & Persson [2] refer to as “the knowledge effective school”, plays a leading role in current educational discourse. Another influential model is “the socially oriented school” (ibid.). This school focuses on environments surrounding learning; e.g. on factors such as students' socio-cultural background, classroom culture,

teachers' relational competence and group processes. Here schools are expected to arrange social situations in which students are successfully socialized. A problem with this second model is that it overemphasizes collectivist aspects at the expense of a personal dimension. As a third and credible answer to the other models Aspelin & Persson (ibid.) explores the concept relational pedagogy<sup>1</sup>. According to the authors, relational pedagogy ought to search for a path between a purely individualistic and a purely social understanding of education.

This article aims to discuss some characteristic aspects of relational pedagogy and thereby proposing a theoretical course in the field. By comparing Kenneth Gergen's and Martin Buber's relational conceptions, the article argues that relational pedagogy could or should be characterized by a distinction between two basic relational dimensions, tentatively labeled co-existence and co-operation.

## 2. Selection of Research in the Field

The concept of relational pedagogy is found in a variety of research contexts (see e.g. Bergum, [6]; Aitken, Fraser & Price, [1]; Boyd, MacNeill & Sullivan, [9]; Papatheodorou, & Moyles, [16]). Research within the field mostly focuses on the educational setting, especially on the interpersonal level and the teacher-student relationship (e.g. Sidorkin, [17], [18]; Beck, [4]; Margonis, [15]).

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to provide an overview and a coherent picture of international research in the field is the anthology *No education without relation* [8]. In the introduction, the editors Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin declare that the book is a collective statement about a new approach to educational theory and that it introduces

“an emerging concept, the concept of relational pedagogy” (ibid., p. 1). The authors come from different disciplines but are united in an interest in interpersonal relationships and how they influence and define teaching and learning. At the heart of the book is the concept of relationships: “Each author contributes to the central premise that meaningful education is possible only when relations are carefully understood and developed.” (ibid., p. 2). The authors also present a “Manifesto of Relational Pedagogy: Meeting to Learn, Learning to Meet”. Usually forgotten, the manifesto declares, is that education basically is about real people who are related to each other. Schools focus too much on knowledge production and ignore that people must meet to learn, rather than learn to meet (ibid. p. 5-6).

The most significant Scandinavian study in the field is probably Moira von Wright’s monograph *Vad eller Vem?* [21] [What or Who?; in Swedish]. It introduces a distinction between two main perspectives on subjectivity and applies these perspectives to the educational setting. From the punctual perspective subjectivity is understood to be an individual product of social circumstances or internal features. It assumes that the subject can be isolated, identified, defined and prescribed. Education is supposed to take place within separate individuals. Learning is described as a process in which the individual subject receives information and/or creates meaning on his/her own. The relational perspective, which “constantly needs to be re-conquered” (ibid, p. 31, my translation) considers people in relation to each other. From this perspective, subjectivity is characterized by actions within dynamic relationships. In this case, education means participation in an inter-subjective process (ibid, p. 73 ff., 138).

A recent and acclaimed relational study is Kenneth Gergen’s *Relational being* [13]. This book provides a starting point for the continued attempt to characterize relational pedagogy.

### 3. Bounded Being and Relational Being

Gergen [13] argues against the dominant way of thinking in the Western world, which is based on a conception of man as a bounded being. The idea of the bounded being has deep philosophical roots and has been reinforced over time, e.g. by contributions from different scientific disciplines and traditions. It defines man as essentially autonomous and rational. The self is conceived to be independent of others. The individual lives in his own world, alone, free and responsible only to himself. What is real and important is within him. Relationships are perceived as phenomena which may occur temporarily when two autonomous individuals converge. We are fundamentally differentiated from others, and cannot fully trust anyone but ourselves.

Gergen speaks of the relational being, and thereby questions the notion of the bounded being. He aims to show that man constantly exists in relational processes. There are no separate individuals and no entirely subjective experiences, he argues. What we usually call the self is in fact an aspect of relationships. A relationship is “a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self” (ibid, p. 15). Gergen provides a relational reconstruction of different kinds of ideas and concepts that we normally associate to a separate individual:

“My hope is to demonstrate that virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone.” (Ibid, p. xv).

A key concept in Gergen’s theory is co-action. Whether individuals are together or physically alone, their actions are coordinated. All meaning emerges from co-action, i.e. human beings create meaning in collaboration. Relationships are processes that individuals cannot be separated from. Thoughts, intentions, experiences, memory, creativity – all kinds of traits that we usually associate with individual consciousness – are expressions of our relational existence. We relate to others in practically everything we do. The concept co-action implies that human beings are tied to their world:

“Co-action is first a process of mutual constraint. Inherent in the process of coordinating is an ordering (...). Without the capacity to coordinate in this way, our actions are rendered unintelligible. “To be a person” is not to exist in a fundamental state of freedom, but of constraint.” (Ibid. p. 49).

Although Gergen does not explicitly use the term relational pedagogy, it becomes clear what his conception of relational being means in terms of education. According to his work, policy documents, curricula, educational programs and so on, usually depart from an individualistic perspective (ibid., pp. 241). They presuppose the existence of a bounded being. Teachers and students are seen as separated from each other. Education is interpreted in terms of rational thinking and the exchange of ideas. From Gergen’s relational framework, teachers and students participate in each other’s lives and are constituted in relation to each other. Gergen proposes that “the primary aim of education is to enhance the potentials for participating in relational processes – from the local to the global.” (Ibid. p. 243). Students as well as teachers are parts of different relational networks and act in different circles of participation; including e.g. the teacher-student relationship, in-group relations and relations with communities. Neither the teacher nor the student acts solo. Teaching means to co-act, to participate in joint educational practices.

## 4. Problematization

Gergen (ibid. p. xxiii) writes that “Perhaps the most significant contribution to the present work is Martin Buber’s volume, *I and Thou*”. A comparison between the two frameworks could serve the purpose of highlighting central aspects of relational pedagogy. Gergen’s point, that the human being is always already emerging from relationship and cannot step out of relationship, is clearly in line with Buber’s thought. However, Buber’s distinction between two relational forms does not play a palpable role in Gergen’s work.

Imagine a teacher and a student that meet face-to-face in a classroom. The student turns to the teacher and acts, verbally and nonverbally, whereupon the teacher responds. In this elementary process the teacher may meet the student as she actually is, i.e. he may be immediately present in relation to her<sup>2</sup>, or he could transform her into an object and respond to this representation.

As we have seen, Gergen’s [13] main concept is co-action. Human life, no matter how subjective it may seem, actually means to do things together. People act in social contexts and use a variety of relational resources. The self is not located within man – it is an aspect of coordinated sociality. Gergen notices that the relational flow could be more or less constructive. He uses a variety of concepts to demonstrate such a difference. For example, he (ibid., p. 47) distinguishes between relational processes that are largely unproductive and those that are productive – where the former hinder the joint experience and the latter inject it with vitality and open up new opportunities for co-action. Gergen also speaks of communication in terms of synchronic sensitivity. This concept represents a phenomenon where the participants are well attuned and where “Each action flows smoothly from that which has preceded” (ibid., p. 165). Still, Gergen’s concepts are built on an ontological basis that differs from Buber’s in one important respect. Gergen writes:

“We should not conclude that ‘nothing exists’ before the moments of co-action. Whatever exists simply exists. However, in the process of co-action whatever there is takes shape as something for us. It comes to be ‘mountains’, ‘trees’, and ‘sun’ in terms of the way we live.” (Ibid. p. 37).

Gergen proposes that reality is “something for us”. Buber’s point is that the world is twofold to man, i.e. whatever man relates to becomes either something or someone.

Implied in this article is that relational pedagogy often ignores the fundamental distinction between the two types of relationships that Buber – and other social philosophical theorists<sup>3</sup> – has emphasized. Below, the attempt to characterize relational pedagogy continues with an account of Buber’s anthropological philosophy and a comparison between Buber’s and Gergen’s [13] relational conceptions.

## 5. Buber’s Anthropological Philosophy

Buber’s magnum opus *I and Thou* [12] lays the foundation of his philosophy. In the first sentence, Buber declares that “To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.” (Ibid, p. 19). When I relate to the world as another living being, Thou meets me. To relate to someone as Thou means to be directly involved in his/her essence. When I relate to the world as an object for my perception or actions the world becomes It to me. I need to relate to the world as It – experience, know and manage things, use rational categories to order my world. Still, as a human being I am realized in the I-Thou relationship. I become a genuine I through my relation to the Thou, because: “All real living is meeting.” (Ibid, p. 26). The human being is born in relation to Thou, and from this relationship, I develops. When I get conscious of myself as an object, separated from Thou, It makes it entry. I-Thou is a primary and immediate relationship, while I-It is a secondary and mediated relationship.

In *Between man and man* [11, pp. 236] Buber speaks of the sphere of between as the fundamental fact of human existence. The sphere of between is conceived as the pure substance which is left if we exclude inner impressions and external conditions. Buber considers this sphere to be a primal category of human reality and the beginning of a genuine alternative to individualistic anthropology and collectivist sociology. In an often cited phrase Buber claims that:

“The fundamental fact of human existence is neither the individual as such nor the aggregate as such. Each, considered by itself, is a mighty abstraction. The individual is a fact of existence in so far as he steps into a living relation with other individuals. The aggregate is a fact of existence in so far as it is built up of living units of relation. The fundamental fact of human existence is man with man.” (Ibid., p. 240).

In *Elemente des Zwischenmenschlichen* [10] Buber continues to explore his two-dimensional concept of relationship by making a distinction between the interhuman and the social. These concepts are seen as two distinct areas of human life. ‘The interhuman’ is an ontological concept; it stands for the basic fact of human existence. ‘The social’ captures different kinds of group phenomena; for example roles, norms, conventions and patterns of communication. In ‘the social’ we communicate with words and gestures and co-ordinate our behaviour with others. It is an ordered activity. In ‘the interhuman’, none of this has to happen, but there is a “dynamic facing of the other, a flowing from I to Thou” (ibid. p. 37). ‘The interhuman’ is an unpredictable and basically indescribable event. It includes elements of a pre-social relationship and therefore it could not be identified as social construction.

One important aspect of Buber’s conception of man is the single one. He borrows this concept from Soren Kierke-

gaard's philosophy. In Buber's version it signifies a person who is guided by his conscience, who takes stand on a "narrow ridge" [11, p. 243] and answers for whatever addresses him. The single one frees himself from the collective, not by turning away from it, but by meeting other persons in it. By stepping into a mutual relationship the single one also gets free from himself. An individual becomes truly human in an authentic meeting between man and man (*ibid.* pp. 46-97). We may say that it is the personal moment that signifies life in 'the interhuman'. The idea of the single one implies a conception of man as a person-in-relation.

So, according to Buber, relational processes may be divided in two. Participants are either immediately present in relation to each other – relate to others as Thou – or stand in mediated relationships – relate to others as It. In relation to Thou the I makes its appearance as person, while in relation to It the I makes its appearance as individuality [12, p. 67]. The subject always exists in relationships, either as a (co-) constructor of social reality or as a partner in an interhuman event.

## 6. Man as Social Construction or Existential Reality

As we have seen both Gergen [13] and Buber presuppose that man is related to the world in a fundamental sense, i.e. that the self is originally as well as momentarily born in relationships. However, against Gergen's [13] notion that everything we perceive as real must be understood as social construction, stands Buber's idea that the relationship between I and Thou is of existential nature. Buber [12, p. 31] declares that "In the beginning is relation". He also speaks of an inborn Thou which precedes the self. The I-Thou relationship is assumed to be grounded ontologically in this "a priori of relation" (*ibid.* p. 39).

If we follow Buber, man is not defined as a social product or an aspect of social practice. To be human essentially means to be involved in a meeting with Thou, where elements of a pre-social Thou is revealed. Thus, participants in such relational processes that Gergen examine could, from Buber's perspective, either be immediately present or stand in mediated relationships. Also in contrast to Gergen's idea of the relational being, Buber's person-in-relation cannot be understood in terms of constraint. On the contrary, to be I in relation to Thou means to be involved in an unpredictable event [12, pp. 43]. This is not to say that Gergen's concept co-action is synonymous to what Buber calls I-It. Still – like many other concepts frequently used in relational theory – the discourse on co-action tends to blur the significant distinction between I-Thou/I-It (as well as the one between 'the social'/'the interhuman'). Even if two individuals co-act in accordance with all principles for effective communication, none of them has to meet the other as Thou. Coordinated

action is just an important step towards the more fundamental transformation which occurs in a genuine, personal meeting.

Gergen (*ibid.*, p. 6) quotes a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to illustrate the idea of the bounded being:

"Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,

Only a signal shown, a distant voice in the darkness;

So the ocean of life, we pass and we speak one another,  
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and silence."

It happens to be that this particular poem is often used when Buber's pedagogy is discussed (see Benktson [5, p. 107]. As Benktson (*ibid.*) writes, the depiction of the ships' meeting invites to an understanding of Buber's idea of an authentic meeting. In contrast to Gergen's reading, Benktson proposes that the poem describes man as an interhuman being, a being which only now and then truly meets others. In other words, man is always in relation to something, but only occasionally he/she is enlightened by someone.

## 7. Co-operation and Co-existence

An educational discourse that emphasizes the individual's internal processes and manifestations – thus ignoring the world existing between persons – is misleading. Furthermore, an educational discourse that holds a concept of relationship but still not recognizes its personal aspect is not sufficient. This article holds the idea of education as primarily realized in an interhuman event, occurring against a background of social construction.

A relational process is experienced in different ways depending on which side of the relationship a person is. Of course, when a teacher and a student relate to each other, the partner in front of the teacher is not identical with the partner in front of the student. Also, when the teacher relates to the student as Thou there is an essential bond, yet, the teacher's Thou is not identical with the student as existential being. In other words, the character of any relationship is unique in each moment, seen from the attitude of the single one. Unlike Gergen (*ibid.*) Buber characterizes man as a person-in-relation, that is, a unique person, constantly relating to someone or something. Buber's basic idea is that the world either becomes a living partner or an object, in accordance with a person's twofold attitude.

Surely, education could be understood as a relational flow which is in large built up by the kinds of common activities that Gergen (*ibid.*) identifies. However, the point being made in this article is that perspectives on what people do together need to be supplemented by perspectives on what people are together. More specifically, the relational processes that Gergen define in terms of co-action ought to be divided in two. Participants are either immediately present in relation to each other – relate to others as Thou – or stand in mediated

relationships – relate to others as It. Now, it might be illustrative to summarize this idea in terms similar to the main concept of Gergen's. Thus, the tentative model below emanates from Buber's conception and is constructed with reference to Gergen's concept co-action. (See also Aspelin & Persson [2]).

Co-operation represents a process in which individuals coordinate their actions. The process is mediated by social patterns, such as linguistic and paralinguistic rules. Co-operation has an external as well as an internal aspect. On the one hand, it stands for interpersonal communication; on the other, it covers interaction between a subject and his/her surrounding. In the domain of co-operation, people use tools or other means in order to attain different kinds of goals. The activity is defined by some degree of predictability and reticence. Co-operation is created by purposeful action, i.e. it includes goals outside of the relationship.

Co-existence signifies a personal encounter between man and man. The term has ontological meaning, i.e. human essence is assumed to be realized in this event. Co-existence cannot be defined using conventional behavioral concepts. It stands for an existential meeting in which one person is immediately present vis-à-vis another. In the domain of co-existence, no means are used and no medium stands between persons. Co-existence is characterized by unpredictability and it lacks elements of planning and calculation. Co-existence is a goal in itself; i.e. meaning is inherent in the relationship.

From this model, we might say that the concept of relational pedagogy should hold both co-operation and co-existence. The two relational forms are understood to be intimately related to each other. We can assume that individuals participating in teaching for the most part are engaged in a largely socially-structured activity, i.e. teachers and students talk about, use, reflect on, discuss, and analyze different things. Here, such activities are referred to as co-operation. The individuals coordinate their actions with the actions of actual and imaginary others, in order to manage and accomplish things. Teaching is mainly made up of an infinite amount of moments of co-operation. Still, in some social situations, these structured processes turn into moments of co-existence, i.e. are interrupted by events in which the participants actually live in a shared, personal dimension. Within the framework of co-existence, subjectivity means being immediately present to the very essence of another human being.

Co-operation may evoke co-existence. It may also be fertilized by co-existence, i.e. the activity is influenced – or impregnated – by genuine meetings. Moreover, co-operation can be disciplined according to formal or informal interaction orders. If such discipline is pursued, the activity is transformed from mutuality to instrumentality. Pure co-operation has an instrumental character and discourages – raises barriers against – co-existence.

## 8. Conclusions

In the introduction, pictures of the dominant educational discourses were sketched. The first discourse was based on an individualistic conception, the second of an (over) socialized conception. It was claimed that relational pedagogy should respond to these discourses, by emphasizing the concept of relation. Generally speaking, relational pedagogy is a theoretical discourse based on the notion of relationship as the basic unit of education. It presupposes that the human being is constituted in and through a relational process. Teachers and students are assumed to be constantly participating in different kinds of relational activity. This perspective was exemplified by Gergen's [13] relational theory. Furthermore, the article discussed relational pedagogy as an educational theory where neither individual nor social aspects are overemphasized, but where the concept of relationship basically is given a two-fold meaning. With reference to Buber's conception it claimed that a social concept as Gergen's co-action could be divided in two, tentatively by speaking of co-operation and co-existence. The article also implied that such a distinction could or should characterize relational pedagogy. To sum up the argument: in order to become a trustworthy theoretical alternative not only to the individualistic but also to the collectivist conception of education, relational pedagogy needs to acknowledge the two-dimensional conception of education.

The global educational discourse lacks the vital concept of relationship. However, it would not be enough to complement its fixation on individuals and measurable accomplishments with expositions of e.g. the social mission of the school, the importance of building social relationships, the social construction of knowledge, the importance of improving students' social skills and teachers' social competence. On the whole, it would not be enough to analyze relationships in education as processes of social construction. The problematic thing about the discourse on social relationships is that it disregards the personal and interhuman dimension.

If we are right in saying that the interhuman sphere is the foundation of education, the total neglect of its existence is fatal. An important mission for relational pedagogy is to question the individualistic conception of education. In doing so, we need to show that educational subjects act and live in relationships of varying quality. But we also need to show that educational life and progress, in a deeper sense, involves personal, immediate meetings between man and man.

---

## REFERENCES

- [1] V. Aitken, D. Fraser, G. Price, "Negotiating the spaces. Relational Pedagogy and Power in Drama Education". *International Journal of Education and the Arts*. Vol. 8: p. 1-18, 2007.
- [2] J. Aspelin & S. Persson, Om relationell pedagogik. [On relational pedagogy; in Swedish] Malmö: Gleerups, 2011.
- [3] J. Aspelin, "What really matters is between. Understanding the focal point of education from an inter-human perspective". *Education Inquiry*, Vol 1, p. 127-136, 2010.
- [4] C. Beck, "Difference, Authority and the Teacher-student relationship". *Philosophy of Education*, 1994 [http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/eps/pes-yearbook/94\\_docs/beck.htm](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/eps/pes-yearbook/94_docs/beck.htm)
- [5] B-E. Benktson, "Martin Bubers författarskap som pedagogisk inspirationskälla". [Martin Buber's writings as a source of educational inspiration]. *Bildning, Kunskap, Demokrati*. En vänbok till Gunnar Bergendal. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1995.
- [6] V. Bergum, "Relational pedagogy. Embodiment, improvisation, and interdependence". *Nursing Philosophy*. Vol. 4: p. 121-128, 2003.
- [7] G. Biesta, *Beyond learning. Democratic education for a human future*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006.
- [8] C. Bingham & A. Sidorkin, Ed., *No education without relation*. NY: Peter Lang Pub. Inc., 2004.
- [9] R. Boyd, N., MacNeill, G, Sullivan, "Relational pedagogy: putting balance back into students' learning". *Curriculum leadership*. Vol 4, 2006.
- [10] M. Buber, *Det mellanmänskliga*. [The Interhuman; in Swedish. Original title: *Elemente des Zwischen-menschlichen*] Ludvika: Dualis Förlag, 1953/1990.
- [11] M. Buber, *Between man and man*. London and New York: Routledge, 1947/2002.
- [12] M. Buber, *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner Book Company, 1923/2000.
- [13] K. Gergen, *Relational being. Beyond self and community*. Oxford University press, 2009.
- [14] A. Lingis, *The community of those who have nothing in common*. Bloomington & Minneapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- [15] F. Margonis, Frank, "The demise of authenticity". *Philosophy of education*, 1998. ([http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-yearbook/1998/margonis\\_2.html](http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-yearbook/1998/margonis_2.html)).
- [16] T. Papatheodorou & J. Moyles, *Learning together in the early years. Exploring Relational pedagogy*. N.Y: Routledge, 2009.
- [17] A. Sidorkin, "Toward a pedagogy of relation". *Philosophical Studies in Education*. 2000, Vol. 32: p. 9-14.
- [18] A. Sidorkin, "The Pedagogy of the Interhuman". *Philosophy of Education*, 1995, p. 412-419.
- [19] V. Turner, *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1969.
- [20] F. Tönnies, *Community and society*. [Original title: *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirischer Culturformen*]. New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1887/1957.
- [21] M. von Wright, *Vad eller vem? En pedagogisk rekonstruktion av G H Meads teori om människors intersubjektivitet*. [What or who?; in Swedish]. Göteborg: Daidalos, 2000.
1. Alternative terms are relational education and the pedagogy of relation. Below, only the term relational pedagogy is used.
  2. In accordance with Buber's own presentations the masculine form is used below when it is referred to the teacher. For the sake of clarity, the feminine form is used when it is referred to the student.
  3. Buber's conception is comparable to other social philosophical theories in which there are distinctions between two main aspects of relational life, e.g. as Ferdinand Tönnies's [20] *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft*, Victor Turners's [19] *communitas-structure* and Alphonso Lingis's [14] *the community of those who have nothing in common-rational community*. C.f. Aspelin [3].