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# The Idea of *Bildung* in the Current Educational Discourse: A Response to Irene Heidt

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It is surprising that there is a young academic in 2015 working intensively on the German philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and his concept of *Bildung*. In times where – as the author states herself – educational systems globally tend to follow neoliberal principles and where the visibility, commodification, and instrumentalization of knowledge produce a “culture of performativity” (Masschelein & Simons, 2006, p. 19) within a so-called knowledge society, Humboldt’s ideas about *Bildung* seem very far away from the current mainstream thinking and policy making. But maybe it is just because of this current dominance of neoliberalism in education that it is worth remembering a philosopher and linguist who developed a neo-humanistic concept of *Bildung* which emphasizes a process of holistic growth, self-realization of the individual as an entirety, freedom, and self-understanding as well as a sense of social responsibility, and which puts the development of the individual’s unique potential and self at the center of educational processes. In her paper the author not only analyses Humboldt’s philosophical concept of *Bildung* itself but traces the process of its institutionalization in which Humboldt himself, having become a Secretary of Education under Frederick III, was actively involved. Heidt analyses how the concept of *Bildung* lost the impetus of freedom and autonomous agency and became an instrument for selection and an agent for social and cultural reproduction, discipline, and control. Today’s concept of *Bildung* is very much – according to Heidt – influenced by neoliberal thinking and so much altered as to become hardly recognizable. For Heidt, *Bildung* – similar to Humboldt’s concept but at the same time radically transformed – can only be found outside of educational institutions, e.g., in social networks or street art in cosmopolitan big cities. *Bildung*, according to the author’s main hypothesis, paradoxically no longer takes place in globally stratified educational institutions, but in a kind of alternative counter world and very much through the medium of language.

I would generally agree with this interesting and thought-provoking hypothesis, although I’m not convinced that the concept of *Bildung* is completely “dead” *within* educational discourse and educational institutions. In educational philosophy for instance, the theory of *Bildung* is still very much alive. Processes of *Bildung* within this approach are distinguished in terms of quality from those that are commonly called *learning processes*. While learning in this view takes place *within* a framework of orientation and does not imply a change on the level of self and identity, “*Bildung*” includes a more fundamental transformation (Koller, 2007, p. 50; Peukert, 2014). It is not surprising that this view of *Bildung* as a fundamental transformation of self is strongly related to theories of intercultural understanding. Confrontation with alternative worldviews can be an opportunity not only to understand the other, but also to become aware of one’s own perspective, to critically assess it, and to transform it into a new way of thinking. Thus conceived, *Bildung* is closely related to

intercultural encounters and understanding (see e.g., Bohlin, 2013; Bredella, 2010). In general, we can say that in the German academic context, the intercultural approach to *Bildung* is an important approach to education in general, both on a theoretical level and on a practical pedagogical level, taking otherness into account and dealing with plurality and diversity on an ethical level (Gogolin, Krüger-Potratz, & Meyer, 1998; Küster, 2003).

In other contexts too, the concept of *Bildung* is still alive: a good example is the way the CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), has been discussed within the German-speaking academic community. The main concern is about the reductionist, one-sided instrumental-functional concept of language learning, which ignores educational dimensions (intercultural, aesthetic, critical, and creative) – or, in other words, aspects of *Bildung* within language learning and teaching. There seemed to be a danger in the CEFR that the individual learner with his/her own interests, biographies and purposes would not be taken seriously, especially because of the schematic representation of language development based on the scales of competence and their descriptors. The critical discussion reflects the conflict between long established culturally anchored beliefs about the purpose and aims of language education and the spreading of neo-liberal “social imaginaries,” which are being established economically and politically (Hu, 2012).

Another example lies in the criticism of the “Bologna process,” an attempt to modernize Europe’s university education system, increasing intercompatibility between institutions and degree systems (bachelors/masters) and making it easier for students to switch between universities or study in a foreign country. ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm)). Many authors express their increasing discomfort at current ways of thinking and speaking about education as a consequence of the Bologna process and in the context of school policy. Liessmann’s book with the provocative title *Theorie der Unbildung* (2006) – translated into English as *Theory of Miseducation* – is a good example. Liessmann refers explicitly to Humboldt’s concept of *Bildung* as human self-formation, and criticizes especially that education within the Bologna philosophy is not oriented to the possibilities of the individual and not to the body of knowledge of cultural traditions, but to external factors such as the changing demands of the market, employability, and technological development.

To conclude, Heidt is right in claiming that *Bildung* (like culture) is a fundamental concept within the German history of ideas. It was indeed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century a powerful component of idealism. Not only Humboldt, but also Friedrich Schiller in his “Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man” emphasized that aesthetic education would lead to freedom, and that political freedom is a product of aesthetic education – not to forget the important literary tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, a specific genre within European Literature where a person undergoes a process of self-understanding and social responsibility (Summerfield & Downward, 2010). It is an interesting hypothesis that *Bildung* today no longer takes place in educational settings but in “real life,” outside of schools and universities, but I would argue that the idea of *Bildung* still plays an important role within debates on educational issues. Furthermore, similar concepts such as “transformative learning” in the Anglo-American context have been inspired by the concept of *Bildung* (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; for *Bildung* within the Swedish Higher Education System, see e.g., Bohlin, 2006). Heidt draws a big picture that encompasses centuries, continents, and languages, and in doing so, raises important questions. At the same time, it is important to look at the development of ideas within educational discourse through a more microscopic

historical and context-sensitive lens. This would demonstrate heterogeneous practices and views – also within the seemingly standardized educational discourse of today.

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