

Klaus Mollenhauer (1928-1998) is one of the most important German theorists of education from the postwar era. Mollenhauer is still widely known in Germany for his 1968 book *Education and Emancipation* –a timely text which highlights the relevance of the Frankfurt School to education and social work (*Sozialpädagogik*). Mollenhauer's final monograph, his 1983 *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing* has been translated into multiple languages including my recent translation in English. It deals in a highly original and accessible way with education in its most basic anthropological and cultural constituents. As one of his students, Michael Parmentier has observed, this text exercised

a similar effect on the pedagogical discourse of the 1980s as *Education and Emancipation* had on the discourse of the 60s. The principles that Mollenhauer discovers or rediscovers in the cultural tradition and its transmission [*Überlieferung*] in... early modern education... [allows] the engagement of adults with younger generations also to be grounded in the future.

Now, this last sentence may sound slightly strange; but I hope to make its meaning relatively clear in the course of my presentation.

I begin my presentation, though, by providing a bit more context regarding Mollenhauer's intellectual biography. I will then examine the first parts of the first chapter of his *Forgotten Connections*. In examining this short text, I hope to explain:

- 1) Mollenhauer's understanding of the crucial educational concept *Bildung*;
- 2) how he sees *aporia* and *loss* as a critical part of *Bildung*; and
- 3) how he sees remembrance as the central task for education and for understanding *Bildung*.

The publication of *Forgotten Connections* represents a mid- or late-career shift for Mollenhauer. In it, he moved from a markedly theoretical, critical and sociological approach to a rather different one that he knew from his student days. This was the orientation of the human sciences, which encompasses the fields of hermeneutics, phenomenology, and philosophical anthropology. I say something about each of these, in the course of my presentation. In an interview from the 1990s, Mollenhauer explains:

I found I was able to arrive at a better language for studying education and upbringing when I read more, say, of Franz Kafka's educational text [*Letter to his Father*]. Or the extraordinary care that Augustine takes in his writings. These are exercises in the *Bildung* of the self [*Selbstbildung*]. (Mollenhauer 1991, p. 81)

When you interpret or work hermeneutically with these kinds of cultural and autobiographical texts, Mollenhauer continues, "you cannot speak as if you were talking of sociological theory; the text would simply disappear." The reduction of Kafka's work to the terms of expressionism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, even communism –which asked whether Kafka's work should be simply burned-- shows how theory can utterly miss the point. Mollenhauer, for his part, is rejecting the conceptual vocabulary of reification, repression, exploitation and alienation from the then-dominant Frankfurt School. And he is taking up the human sciences, especially the human science of hermeneutics to interpretively read cultural and historical texts as exercises in *Bildung* and self-*Bildung*. Mollenhauer is also asserting more

broadly that are educational questions can be best understood in terms that are concrete, phenomenological, biographical and particularistic.

The term *Bildung* (*Selbstbildung*) in this quote from Mollenhauer is critical. The word *Bildung* has been rendered variously in English: As formation, growth, learning, cultivation, edification, culture, even as literacy. More importantly, it has been defined more philosophically in German as “the developmental opening up of a reality *for a person*; and of this person to *this, her reality*” (from Klafki). *Bildung* in other words, involves a gradual realization of *one’s place* and *potential in the world*, and of *aspects of the world for oneself*. If you recognize a dialectical emphasis in these statements about the relation of self and world, subject and object, you would be correct. It is in a dialectical sense that I use the phrase “for oneself” here and below: It refers not to self-interest or self-absorption but rather to reflective (self-)awareness. This dialectical framing also makes it clear that *Bildung* is not just the result of indifferent socio-political structures and developments. Instead, it is conceived in terms of a process and a range of experiences in the world that one engages in oneself, with others, and for oneself. Mollenhauer characterized *Bildung* as a biographical and experiential “way of the self,” and he once described his central professional interest as “helping people, and above all youth, find the path of their *Bildung*” (Mollenhauer, 1999, p. 158). *Bildung* is constitutive of one’s own biography, and it is embedded in culture and history. This is just as much the case today as Kafka’s biography and *Bildung* was bound with turn-of-the-century Prague, and Augustine’s, with the twilight of the Roman Empire. There are no absolutely ahistorical principles regarding education or concerning the self and its growth.

Education and *Bildung* for Mollenhauer, however, are not just about the relationship of student and teacher, or the child and educational institutions and processes. Instead Mollenhauer frames the problems of education very generally by repeating a question originally formulated in 1826 by philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher: “What does the older generation actually want of the younger?” In this context, *Bildung* occurs inside *and* outside of the school or other educational institutions. And a pedagogical relation --a key concept in the human science pedagogical tradition—is thus just as likely to arise in a counselling setting, in everyday life with grandparents or parent-figures, as in a school context with a particular teacher.

Bildung as a path or way of the self for Mollenhauer is hardly something with a self-evident direction or goal. Mollenhauer characterizes it, perhaps paradoxically, as being marked by a certain “pathlessness.” Mollenhauer refers not only to Kafka and Augustine, but also to a wide range of artists, pedagogues and authors who told of their way (or others’ ways) of the self. In doing so, he notes that the “stories” that they tell are not ones of victory over adversity or of self-realization and self-assertion in the face of oppression and repression:

In many instances, these [stories] are not success stories. They neither advance the view that any one concept is the one and true path to successful upbringing, nor do they encourage others to follow blindly in their footsteps; indeed, they don’t even worship success as the be-all and end-all... All the same, they express themselves in a comprehensible and compelling fashion.

Bildung as a path of the self, Mollenhauer is saying, is not one of ever greater gains and accomplishments. It does not lead to the realization of the self in a simple or unproblematic sense. It is “pathless” in a manner that I think most of us today can recognize: Simply think of how you found your way to the field of education, and to philosophy of education. Similarly, finding one’s life calling or life partner remains as much or more a process of unplanned self-discovery than the pursuit of a particular, predetermined goal. Accordingly, *Bildung* certainly does not have optimal self-realization or any other *telos* as its destination. Speaking of these same biographical and autobiographical texts Mollenhauer continues:

The historically remarkable feature about these texts is not that we have all had experiences like the ones they describe – this is not likely to be the case. What *is* remarkable and new is that an educational aporia, a pathlessness intrinsic to upbringing – one that we can accept as our own – appears in these descriptions.

Mollenhauer is saying that other’s accounts of *Bildung* do **not** provide prescriptions or recipes for our own lives. Mollenhauer’s biographical and autobiographical hermeneutic instead involves recognition and orientation rather than prescription or instruction. Also relevant to Mollenhauer’s method is his aside that the pathless and aporetic character we see in accounts of *Bildung* is “one we can accept as our own.” In using the first person plural, Mollenhauer is doing more than just enacting a refusal of an impersonal, social-scientific vocabulary. He is also gesturing towards certain limitations that “we” share in our knowledge and experience of ourselves and of education, upbringing and *Bildung* in general; and it is in this sense that I also make references in the first person.

In seeing *Bildung* as the way of the self, it is important to understand that for any one path actually taken, there are always many other paths and directions for growth and enrichment that are lost. And there are always risks associated with any path taken. To grow one must also remain in some ways stunted; to realize aspects of oneself, one must risk oneself and deny other potential strengths and possibilities. Loss is as real for us in *Bildung* as are any advancements or accomplishments.

All of the autobiographies written over the past five centuries bear testimony to the fact that, apart from being grateful to our parents for the upbringing they gave us, we also have reason to find fault with what they did to us. Each individual’s *Bildung* is at once a process of broadening and enrichment as well as a narrowing and impoverishment – a question of what might have been. Adults are more than mere midwives to the development of a child’s mind and spirit: they also act as all-powerful censors of the adult that the child ultimately becomes.

The idea that there is no avoiding loss and damage in *Bildung* might sound strange to Anglo-American ears. I think we have a very sunny view at least when it comes to what education can or should be. However, from a Continental perspective, Mollenhauer is not really saying anything new in acknowledging that loss is unavoidable in *Bildung*, learning and formation. I have argued elsewhere that it is also important to read other thinkers with continental ties, such as Wittgenstein and Foucault, as

saying something similar. This is to be found, for example, in the later Wittgenstein's account of education and learning as a kind of behavioristic "training." It is also evident in the later Foucault's notion of power as being generative –not just oppressive– in the process of subject formation. And both of these thinkers play important roles in Mollenhauer's *Forgotten Connections*.

Despite this perhaps dark view of education, Mollenhauer's position is hardly one of fatalism or resignation. This can be illustrated by appealing to one of the principles that Mollenhauer's student Parmentier mentioned --"principles that Mollenhauer discovers or rediscovers in the cultural tradition and its transmission." This principle is the idea that we cannot *not* engage in upbringing and in education, broadly understood. He means this in the same sense that we "cannot *not* communicate" as the famous saying goes. Mollenhauer discusses this principle in connection with what he calls the "anti-education" stance, which is clearly echoed today in calls for "deschooling" and "learner-directed" education. Mollenhauer's counter-argument to these radical critiques is as follows:

But... children... "want" a future for themselves... [and] they can only imagine this in terms of the adult life that is already presented all around them. Even the most radical anti-educationist cannot avoid embodying an adult way of life in front of children; like any adult, he or she powerfully exemplifies one way of life or another for a child. But the question is: Is the life that is being embodied a "good" one? And does the kind of life being lived contribute positively to the child's *Bildung*?

In considering how we might answer these questions, Mollenhauer points to a further limitation –one that is reflective of his hermeneutic emphasis on the personal and concrete. This is an epistemological limitation imposed by our own experience and biography. He explains as follows:

When it comes to rearing children, we are all inherently biased. Reflecting on raising children basically involves either justifying one's own behavior or attempting to blame others – and in most cases it entails both.

Engaging in others' upbringing and education, in other words, inevitably means comparing and evaluating one's own experiences, both good and bad, from one's own *Bildung* and upbringing. This limitation is illustrated in Mollenhauer's questions about our own parents and our present roles as adults. But Mollenhauer goes further and also makes it clear that sociological and other scholarly approaches cannot help in overcoming limitation. In the acknowledgements page of *Forgotten Connections*, Mollenhauer quotes one of his former teachers, Herwig Blankertz: "The whole of education, of upbringing, has a meaning that cannot be subsumed to science and scholarship."

In the face of such limitations, how are we to answer the kind of questions that Mollenhauer --and before him, Schleiermacher raises? "Is the life we embody a "good" one?" "What do we, the older generation, actually want of the younger? Much educational research and discussion only addresses what arises once these questions are *assumed* to have been answered. However, Mollenhauer makes it clear that it is necessary for each generation to answer them anew. And they are often answered for us

in terms of our deep-seated hopes and convictions, rather than via theoretical constructs. The best guidance we have to go by in raising and addressing these questions is our own “biased” responses to the upbringing of others and of ourselves. As Kafka says –and as Mollenhauer is fond of repeating-- “the magnitude of the matter goes far beyond the scope of my memory and understanding.” This statement is not only about our limitations in addressing *Bildung* and upbringing, it also underscores the role of memory or recollection in reflection on it. This recollection for Mollenhauer is two-fold: As Kafka’s statement suggests, it is individual –we reflect on our individual experiences of growing up. More importantly for Mollenhauer, it is also *collective* and *cultural*.

The word culture in the subtitle of *Forgotten Connections* foregrounds the importance of this collective phenomenon in Mollenhauer’s thought. Mollenhauer understands our culture NOT as something that is exemplified in cultural or religious occasions –such as Christmas or Ramadan. Culture refers to our shared lifeworld: the idea that our experiences are not entirely subjective, locked inside of us, but that we can and do share them through language, understanding and empathy. This is reflected in the phenomenological notion of the “intersubjective lifeworld.” It is a world of everyday realities and experiences that we call attention to even in the simplest utterances: “How are you today?” “I’m hungry and need a break!” or “See you tomorrow.” There is a collectively interwoven net of meanings, expectations and norms in which we interrelate in making such statements. Although they point in some ways to private experiences and “inner states,” what is exchanged in conversation involving these statements does not require elaborate proof or justification; instead it is confirmed in the context of everyday, practical and relational action.

This shared lifeworld is closely linked to the third of the specific human sciences that I listed above: philosophical anthropology. This refers to the study of “the shared circumstances of being human” as philosopher Charles Taylor has phrased it. Its focus is not a particular shared lifeworld –e.g. that of English-language social life—but the circumstances that *may* be thought of as being more broadly human. Mollenhauer’s first principle, that we cannot *not* be a part of upbringing, is an example of an assertion relying on philosophical anthropology. It certainly applies to everyday life in Western cultures. Also, the circumstances of human reproduction and child-rearing mean that it is commonplace in many others. In his text, Mollenhauer himself is seeking to identify other patterns and possible commonalities of this kind.

It is finally in this sense that we can come to some understanding of Parmentier’s earlier statement, and of Mollenhauer’s own declaration near the very beginning of his book:

education’s purpose is to further the cause of memory. By memory I mean collective memory – our common cultural heritage whose core themes education attempts to tease out: its principles, viewpoints and norms around which memory can orient itself. This also means that for each individual, the events that make up his or her upbringing and *Bildung* are patterned – and their endurance tested – according to these core themes. In other words, education should focus on cultural and biographical memory, and should seek lasting principles in this memory that develop the child’s potential.

Of course, one core principle or theme is simply the unavoidability of being a part of the intergenerational dynamic of upbringing. A corollary, referenced only in passing above, is that as adults, we “present” something to children. Borrowing Wittgenstein’s concept of “forms of life,” Mollenhauer is saying that we present ways of life or aspects of these ways to children, and that the tacit and mimetic teaching and learning that this implies represents another principle. Yet another principle is that adults not only “educate” involuntarily and unsystematically, but that (in modern societies at least) some adults also do this quite deliberately and systematically, through curriculum and instruction.

Mollenhauer uses the term “representation” to designate this deliberate and systematic teaching. In the conclusion to the second chapter of *Forgotten Connections*, he uses a set of chronologically ordered images to illustrate a kind of collective, cultural passage from presentation to representation. This sequence of images begins with a pre-modern woodcut showing an infant child with his or her parents, both of whom are undertaking very basic handiwork. They are unsystematically and also unavoidably presenting their adult realities to the child –realities which can then be reproduced without formal instruction by the child and successive generations. A number of subsequent images, as Mollenhauer explains, point

the beginnings of something like the social construction of an educational reality. In [the final images,] the ground rules according to which reality is constructed for children are not simply changed; instead, a whole new system of rules emerges. Culture is no longer presented to the child as a seamless whole, but only in part. The part that is presented is offered through a kind of pedagogical rehearsal or practice, as it would be for someone from a foreign land.

This he refers to as “representation.” Mollenhauer has developed these and other commonalities through careful hermeneutic reflection on records, images, works of biography and of fiction. In the face of ongoing challenges to methods of upbringing, education and schooling on all levels, this work of remembrance presents us with something very important. This is something that is *not* generally provided in educational scholarship: It is an attempt at identifying the most basic constituents of upbringing in everyday life and of growth and education in more formalized settings. Mollenhauer also provides some grounding for us to interrogate these. What he does not provide, of course, is answers for what constitutes that which is truly “good” in our lives, nor about how the life we now live contributes to or detracts from the *Bildung* of the child.

Before I finish, let me quickly recap my points about Mollenhauer’s approach –and the purpose of education more broadly-- as one of “remembrance”:

1. This is an approach which begins by recognizing that human experience and growth cannot be captured in abstract and generalized concepts like educator, educand, stages of development, or processes of alienation or repression.

2. It entails a hermeneutic which sees engaged educational reflection as something that cannot far exceed the historical, cultural and personal horizon presented by my own experiences of upbringing and by our present engagements with the younger generation(s).
3. A recognition that these experiences are both ones of loss and injury as well as of development and fulfillment, and that they cannot be pursued in a prescribed or optimized manner.
4. An expository method which relies on concrete, often historical examples from culture in the broadest sense, and sees in these not any positive or negative examples for educational practice, nor opportunities for factual confirmation or falsification. Instead, it regards these as possibilities for recognition and reflection: It is their pathlessness that we accept as our own.
5. A method that simultaneously recognizes the possibility of tentatively identifying commonalities in human experiences and cultures, and the historical and cultural limitations that always constrain such identification.

By enacting this approach in *Forgotten Connections*, what Mollenhauer ends up with is a set of examples or remembrances. And what Mollenhauer is trying to do is to make hermeneutic interconnections between them. One reviewer of the Dutch translation of Mollenhauer's book, Bas Levering, writes:

Mollenhauer does not illustrate, he interprets. He needs to take detours by way of the products of [the] arts and literature in order to see things that are otherwise unnoticeable. [In this way] he is able to enlighten us about education.

These texts, pictures and other examples are provided by Mollenhauer with the intention of suggesting and remembering connections that have otherwise been forgotten. In this way, Mollenhauer raises questions and identifies themes and commonalities that may help guide and ground us in our engagement with children into the future.