Education as Experience

ah: As we're talking, two smartphones rest on the table, we just checked our e-mails and the latest news in the timeline. Some people would describe this scenario as close to “1984”, but you seem to be quite optimistic about technology.

rb: I'd say I'm a techno-optimist, but I'm not sure if that's exactly the right term, because we should only be optimistic about technology to the extent we have the right conversations about it. I guess that's why I'm optimistic, because my work is about using the technology in positive ways. Technology of course won't necessarily take us anywhere positive, but it can. It's important not to think that technology will save us, not to imbue it with special power, but to realize that if we start with the right values and if we keep our values at the core of our work, then the technology can help us to get there, it's a way for us to get where we want to go, it can't do it on its own.

ah: Do you have any suggestions how this productive stance towards technology could be adopted? This seems to be a huge challenge for a lot of people, especially those who aren't digital natives.

rb: One of the things I believe are very interesting is that science fiction is filled with fear of technology going amok. Technology can simulate so much about humanity that we're really scared of being replaced by technology. I think that's really the basis of a lot of our fear. And because we have that fear, we become very passive with the technology. We end up almost creating the circumstances that we fear, because we don't see ourselves as part of the relationship with technology, or part of the people who are shaping technology. We think “Well, I'll just sit back and wait until the computers take over”. It's very important to put ourselves, to put human beings at the center of the equation, and to be very mindful about our relationship to technology and how we use it.

ah: One example of using it mindful and with the human being in the centre is the method of Digital Storytelling. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

rb: Digital Storytelling is a process by which people can create short-form media, which means a 2-5 minutes movie. What's exciting right now is that because of social networks people can share them very easily. So I can sit in my living room in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the middle of the US and I can hear a story about someone in China. Or someone in Africa. Or some place I might never have the opportunity to go to, but now I can know something about the reality of life there through that one person's eyes. The technology has made it easier for people to create such stories and to share aspects of their lives. That's very important for breaking down stereotypes, assumptions about other people, and for connecting us as human beings. When you hear someone's story, you may not relate to the content of the story, but you very often relate to some core emotions: the sense of insecurity, of fear or to concerns over physical violence. We connect as human beings across cultural differences. It's not immediate, I don't want to make it sound like you see a digital story and then the world is cured of all of its problems. But it's a start, especially for young people it's a very powerful way of expanding our worldview.

ah: It seems as if Digital Storytelling is working impressingly on a personal level. Could it also be framed as an instrument of political empowerment?

rb: I would not draw such a line between those two. As the old feminist slogan says, the personal is the political. What is possible for us, the opportunities that are provided to us, the difficulties we face in our lives are deep political. The idea that today people can be creators, not only consumers of media, for me that is really the democratic impulse. In order to get your message out formerly, you had to have a lot of money, you had to have the backing of some group, some access to those finances. And now it's not only that you can have a smartphone where you can create media, but that this media can look really good. That matters! You can create something you can be really proud of, that's appealing, that's engaging. You can produce it, you can distribute it. The avenues of distribution, this is the exciting part of web 2.0, used to be only through big money. But now with an internet connection you can make it possible. This was in part the excitement...
and potential of Egypt¹ and we’ve all come to understand that it’s not as easy as ‘get everyone a cell phone and the world’s state will change’. But the idea of being able to get people’s voices out there in the rest of the world is very important. From very early on, the foundations of my work have come from the feminist movement, from that ideal that everyday life matters. It’s not simply that people have a story, and then you give them a smartphone and then they can share it with the world. Actually, you don’t know your own story until someone gives you the methodology, the platform to articulate it. It’s in the articulation that is at the heart of Digital Storytelling. In the 1960ies this was called consciousness raising, the idea that in thinking about the realities of your own life and of putting that into language, you can raise your own critical consciousness in a way that is politically important. Digital Storytelling can be so many different things to so many different people. Very often it is a way for marginalized groups to have a voice.

ah: Given the power of shared stories and the possibilities of web 2.0 for building empathy with people you don’t know and you haven’t cared about beforehand, how do you use it in your work as an educator, especially concerning Holocaust Education?

rb: We shouldn’t underestimate how important it is to be able to communicate with people face-to-face across the globe, with technology like Skype. Many of my students come from small towns in Wisconsin, this might be their first time in a city. Some of them have travelled outside the country, but some haven’t. I’ve skyped some German colleagues into my class. To talk with a German about their experience of dealing with the history has been incredibly important for them. That shows again the importance of stories, of being able to see people not as national figures but as human beings in all their complexity. That’s part of the challenge of teaching the Holocaust and teaching any subject and in thinking about the digital. The real questions are: How can you express complexity? How do you express human existence in all of its richness?

ah: Could you outline what is special on teaching the Holocaust from the American perspective?

rb: American Holocaust Education very much focuses on the perspective of the victims. In my teaching I try to push against that a little bit, by trying to show the perspective of the perpetrators as well. But it’s very difficult. Sometimes students create a flattening: everyone has difficulties in his own way, everyone has difficult choices. So that’s the challenge: To open up new perspectives but also maintain an ethical stance by which those perspectives can be understood. I’d say students who come to my class often say that when they learned about the Holocaust in high school it was mostly just the facts. Focussing on literature and film, they are able to ask different kinds of questions. How do we remember, how do we represent this event? So it doesn’t just give answers, but also asks questions. That’s what connects students to the subject. These are media-rich courses. Of course we can’t go to sites of destruction. For my students the experience is gained in talking to a survivor of the Holocaust. They become sources of authenticity and enable the students to have some authentic moments.

ah: Enabling your students to connect their own experience is going further than just providing them with the facts. What is your goal as an educator, your ideal of education?

rb: I do the Digital Storytelling at the end of a course on Jewish and Christian Responses to the Holocaust. It is a difficult course because students don’t know that much about theology. But then also because it becomes an interfaith experience, because they have to sit in a room with people that believe very different things from what they believe. The Digital Storytelling asks them to think about their own identity as Jews or Christians or Americans or Atheists, whatever they are, however they identify and think about how that changed over the course of the semester. Because of their communications with other students in the class, because of specific readings that they did, it becomes a way of reflecting on their learning. And considering how their learning changed them. That’s the problem with the focus on facts. We all need to know the facts. But people often think that knowing facts doesn’t change them in any way. The facts are the facts and I’m me. I see education as an experience. So if the experience doesn’t change you in some way you haven’t really learned, just accumulated facts. That ties in to technology, because part of what technology offers us it to make it possible to have new experiences. Of course you can be changed by reading a book, too. But starting from the idea that education is an experience that changes you as a person can be a guiding concept. The question that interests me is: How do the stories of other people become part of my story? When I hear a story that affects me, it changes my own sense of myself and my relation to others. This is where Holocaust education and digital storytelling come together. Education offers the possibility of an experience that changes me, and digital stories also allow me to encounter a story that changes me, and changes my sense of myself. In this way, digital stories make concrete the fact that we are interconnected, that human beings are responsible to each other.

ah: Thank you for your time.

Das Gespräch führte Ana Honnacker.

¹ Gemeint sind hier die Aktionen der Demokratiebewegung während des so- genannten arabischen Frühlings. Beispielsweise über die Ereignisse auf dem Tahrir-Platz berichteten Aktivist_innen über Social Media.