Pedagogy of Politeness

Most of us believe that politeness is or it should be one of the strongest links between people in a functioning society. Could we use this concept to create a “pedagogy of politeness” in today's educational world and implicitly contribute to strengthening respectful relationships between citizens?

At least on an aspirational level, we wouldn't be the first ones to do it.

The third Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, lived only 42 years, between 1671 and 1711.However, it was enough to become one of the most famous philosophers of his time exerting significant influences on European thinkers, including Germans. Shaftesbury believed that order and harmony are fundamental qualities of human nature and that they help us to become moral beings by understanding ethics and aesthetics alike. From here he developed a paradigm of politeness as the foundation for the balance between traditional and progressive currents and perspectives on life, the latter newly emerging during his life, within the English society in which he lived.

As the new class of the emerging bourgeoisie needed more internal confirmation of value than the already established aristocracy who assumed their rights as coming either from something divine or from inheritances and power passed down from generation to generation, Shaftesbury elaborated and wrote a great deal about the new gentleman's "self-education" and "self-creation." Thus, arose the prospect of being able to rise to the same social and human "value" not only through inheritances and social status but also through one’s own strengths, reflections and self-analysis.

 Shaftesbury's arguments found fertile ground in the German world, which at the time was feverishly trying to find a "reconciliation" between the traditional and the progressive. Two very different worlds could have a point of convergence.

Shaftesbury's concept of politeness goes on to talk about a radical social innovation that we can call "education" of social conditions (Smeyers and Depaepe 2008; Tröhler 2008 quoted by Horlacher). Shaftesbury's writings often addressed the question of how inner and outer circumstances could be brought into harmony. " (Horlacher, 2015)

The Germans used (in part) Shatesbury's ideas to substantiate the concept of Educability or in its broadest sense, of Buildung, starting from the concepts of "self-examination" and "self-purification" which he called " in formation ”and“ formation ”, terms that became in German“ bilden ”and Buildung. Thus the ideas of the English count found fertile ground in German Romanticism and the term Buildung became consecrated by Heine, Goethe, Wilhelm von Humboldt and especially Herder, who recalled that the theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart had written in the 1300’s about " Buildung ”as“ the education of the individual ”.

Remaining in the sphere of "Building" in an attempt to extrapolate to a contemporary understanding of the importance of politeness in education, Cynthia Nielsen (2020), philosopher and professor at the University of Dallas, analyzing the hermeneutics of politeness developed by German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer says that for him " each individual is conditioned by his/her historical, socio-political and cultural context. Consequently, we project different hypotheses, prejudices and previous meanings on our dialogical interactions, thus implicitly on the hermeneutics (interpretation) of politeness. Therefore, “Politeness in hermeneutics is rather the idea of an orientation or behavior toward the other that facilitates the possibility of challenging one's supposed opinions so that one's horizon is enriched and expanded. It is an orientation that respects the other's otherness and demonstrates respect in the act of authentic obedience ”.(4)

From this we could try and make the transition to our times towards a “pedagogy of politeness” in education; a pedagogy of combining efficient and perennial traditional pedagogies with progressive, flexible ones, adaptable to the times and human nature of the new generations. A pedagogy of politeness in contemporary education could be the basis of cross-party social agreements, debates on the share of old and new in curricula, the prioritisation of school actions and even between classroom teachers.

A pedagogy of politeness can limit rudeness or behavioural slippage in the relationships between teachers and students, students and students or teachers and teachers. By behaving “beautifully” ethically and aesthetically with each other, we each may become more balanced and give each other a chance to feel respected.

Linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson developed, starting from the concept of "face" of Erving Goffman (1967), a "theory of politeness" that identifies, among other things, strategies of "positive politeness" and strategies of "negative politeness" both with their role and place in interpersonal contacts. The ones of “positive politeness” refer to strategies that are performed to avoid offense, emphasising friendship, for example compliments, showing interest in what you are told or friendly language, while those of “negative politeness” refer to strategies which are performed to avoid offending such as social distancing, formal language or apology.

A recent study of second-graders in Indonesia sought to find out how politeness strategies, both “positive” and “negative” used by teachers, affect students' behaviour and attitudes. The study's findings recommend that teachers primarily use tact (which Gadamer said was "tacit and unformulable" being created in the realm of sensitivity) and generosity as the main attributes of politeness.

On the other hand, the lack of politeness in oral and written language is directly correlated with the degradation of character in education (2). Perhaps it would be good to reflect now at the beginning of the school year in the Northers hemisphere on the implications and consequences of practicing or lack of politeness. Not only our own politeness but also our students’ and last but not least our colleagues’.

Not all of us had the Japanese attitude of “omotenashi” (refined politeness with the desire to maintain harmony and avoid conflict) but we could integrate politeness as a self-evident behaviour for all students, to show them how to -effectively show respect through the whole behaviour and to encourage our colleagues who forget to be polite, to appreciate the value of politeness in forming character and social harmony.

More specifically, a pedagogy of politeness could include, among many others, some behavioural ingredients. The list remains open:

• To listen to the opinions of each student and when they are not justified or based on correct information to try and suggest to them that opinions must always be based on arguments if they want to be taken seriously. This can be done effectively in lessons in all subjects starting at almost any age (from my experience right from the second grade, but certainly from the third upwards the children understand what it means to answer the question “what makes you say that?”)

• The advice and instructions we give to our students but also to our colleagues when the opportunity  not to make unfounded presumptions that might make the other person feel disrespected. This applies to each of us. No one likes to be misjudged because someone starts from a false premise. We all know that there are some of us who "know" better than you do what you did or said. Let's try not to be like them and give others (especially until proven otherwise) the "benefit of the doubt." Let us accept that things may be different from our first interpretation.

• To accept that there are several ways and styles of teaching and to respect our colleagues who respect their students and the subject and from whom the students learn, regardless of whether we like or not the way they organise their lessons or their teaching style.

• After carefully reading and analysing their comments let us take the the critics views into consideration as a way that we can become better professionals rather than criticising the critics to exonerate ourself.

The essence of politeness is grounded in respect for the dignity of the other. As one of the main, if not the most important, goals of education should be character formation, we cannot but hope that we can work and live together so that all of us teachers, parents and children can take  politeness as seriously as possible and incorporate it in our lives and daily activities in and out of class.