



The ungraded life is not worth living?  
Criteria compliance in the philosophy classroom

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## Abstract

Following the educational reforms of the 1990s and the focus on measurable results and achievement documentation, teachers and learners in Sweden have increasingly come to embrace an instrumentalist view on knowledge at the cost of lifelong learning. As market discourse and economic interests have gained ground in the educational realm, the democratic and humanist dimensions of learning and knowledge have diminished in size, in discourse as well as empirical practice. “Criteria compliance” is a way of existing within the educational institution and one’s role as a teacher. As teachers and learners adhere to administrative rather than pedagogical parameters of education, formative assessment and a more interpersonal, meta-cognitive approach to learning are bypassed altogether. A compliance to externally set knowledge criteria entails particularly problematic consequences for philosophy teaching, since an active engagement with philosophy requires an open-ended classroom climate and an unrestrained flow of thought. These aspects are neglected, due to the administrative pressure to measure and document learner achievements. In order to guard philosophy and philosophy teaching from the demands set by market discourse and criteria compliance, the collegial aspect of teaching must be strengthened and the professional pride of teachers restored.

Keywords: criteria compliance, market discourse, formative assessment, knowledge requirements, philosophy syllabus, philosophy teaching

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## 1. Background

We are living in an age of the market. Decades of Neo-liberal policies have made the logic of supply and demand into a societal norm, which steers and affects how we talk about education and those in the teaching profession. The relationship between teachers and learners is increasingly stripped of its democratic and humanist meaning and replaced by a commodification of human relations – despite the fact that the interpersonal, human dimension is a foundation of teaching as a professional discipline. We are living in a time when teaching as a professional discipline is rendered into the realm of a market discourse, with problematic consequences for teachers and their students alike. Indeed, the very idea of education risks being diminished into a mere means of getting by and adapting in a society demanding effectiveness and measured results, rather than as an intrinsically valuable end in itself.

Personally, during my teacher education, I have become increasingly aware of the demands set on teachers: an emphasis on grades and detailed administrative documentation of achievement results on one hand, and high quality classroom pedagogy on the other. In addition, the external and organisational demands for detailed documentation seem to have been, to some extent, internalised by some teachers and teacher students; New Public Management and an emphasis on measurable achievement results are sometimes taken as a given, an inevitable logical necessity of today's global political reality and technological advancement.

As a teacher student of philosophy, I therefore began to ponder what the grading and criteria emphasis means for a subject such as philosophy; is there perhaps some aspect of the current political climate which sets particularly acute challenges for philosophy teachers? In the face of such challenges, how can philosophical and pedagogical quality and professionalism be kept intact?

In this day and age, philosophy teaching may be seen as a strange choice of vocation. After all, critical thinking is considerably more open-ended and time-consuming than the fast-paced demands of economic and administrative interests. On the other hand, it is in times like these when philosophy teaching is needed more than ever, to enable younger generations to fully examine their own lives as well as those of others in society and the world at large. Be it as it may, philosophy teachers today face an enormous challenge: to defend the autonomy and validity of their profession while resisting the pressure to succumb to the societal and educational norms of economic profit and commodification.

I have had the opportunity to read current and up-to-date research on assessment practice and the particular issues faced by schools in Sweden and other countries regarding the validity of assessment and the demands for measurable results. Having come across the term “criteria compliance” (Torrance, 2007, p. 281), I started thinking about the ways in which this particular term may be relevant in the educational context of Sweden and philosophy teaching in particular. I find that criteria compliance is, indeed, highly relevant when considering the challenges faced by philosophy teachers in Sweden. In this paper, I attempt to clarify my reasons and discuss how criteria compliance may be resisted.

## 2. Introduction

Criteria compliance has ideological, epistemological and professional dimensions, all of which will be discussed in the subsequent sections of the paper. The term cannot be properly understood without the wider social context from which it has sprung as well as a historical perspective on the Swedish educational institution. In section 2.1., I specify the term criteria compliance and its meaning in a general sense, before examining its historical background in section 2.2.

An epistemological dimension arises, since questions of educational criteria are necessarily related to those of knowledge. In Section 3, I therefore analyse the Swedish philosophy syllabus by comparing it to that of Finland. The epistemological dimension of criteria compliance is divided into two sub-headings. In 3.1., I examine the fragmentation of philosophy as a school subject. In

3.2., I turn to the knowledge requirements specified in the syllabus and discuss what kind of difficulties they entail for the practice of formative assessment and learner autonomy in the philosophy classroom.

Finally, I argue that criteria compliance implies a certain kind of professional practice and a way of being in one's role as a teacher. The term has therefore also a power dimension in the sense of "governmentality" (Foucault, 1978, p.87) and the institutional framework of the professional agency of teachers. This brings forth questions of teaching profession and professional autonomy, which I discuss in Section 4. In section 5, I suggest ways in which philosophy teachers may resist the pressures of criteria compliance and guard the intellectual integrity and autonomy of their chosen profession.

## 2.1. Criteria compliance – the concept

I am using the term "criteria compliance" (p. 282) as defined by Torrance (2007) in his research on assessment and its effect on achievement and learning. In general terms, criteria compliance is that which is left when formative assessment is stripped of complexity, and assessment practices are adjusted to administrative rather than pedagogical parameters. Emphasis on learner autonomy, information transparency and explicit learning goals, as democratically and pedagogically viable as they are, risk creating and upholding an education system in which learning achievements are considered in instrumentalist terms (Torrance, 2007).

In a learning milieu where the attainment of grades and achievement goals are emphasised, criteria and learning goals become predictable and measurable, formulated as "articulated demands" (Almqvist et al, 2017, p.9). Consequently, the fluidity and unpredictability of a learning process are replaced by "goal-centered tasks defined by detailed instructions" (ibid., p. 9). Thus, assessment occurs not in the service of learning, but *in its stead*. Indeed, compliance with achievement requirements such as they are set in a particular course curriculum is considered to *be the same as thing as learning* (Torrance, 2007). I will take up philosophy and the specific problems which this kind of conceptual shift implies for a philosophy student (not to mention her teacher) in subsequent sections. For now, though, a question emerges: why are we faced with criteria compliance in the first place?

## 2.2. Criteria compliance – a historical background

The applicability and relevance of criteria compliance has to do with the wider paradigm shift that can be witnessed in many countries worldwide. Western education policy and school curriculum designs have, in recent decades, been gradually geared towards an "education for economic growth" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 24). To use Nussbaum's (2010) terminology, there is a near-global dichotomy between an education for profit on one side and an education for human development on the other.

The former has been gaining ground alongside the Neo-liberal policies of the past few decades, Sweden being no exception. Indeed, Sweden has increasingly come to embrace an "attainment-oriented culture" (Torrance, 2007, p. 292) where the accumulation of achievements weighs more than the learning experience itself. Furthermore, the free market economy has helped reform and reconceptualise the very institutional and practical basis of the Swedish educational system, which has come to be characterised by a market discourse: teachers, students and the pedagogical content alike are all understood in terms of economic competition and marketability rather than democratic ideals such as lifelong learning and the full human potential of all learners (Dovemark, 2017).

Certainly, as Nussbaum (2010) is careful to note, the commodification of education is not altogether total, but rather a question of gradual change. The Swedish education system is still based on democratic values and learner autonomy is deemed important and valuable. It is still possible to study philosophy in school, albeit to a limited extent. However, despite the largely

democratic and learner-based education system, the practice of economic terminology in the realm of knowledge and education has gradually gained ground. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly immune to criticism, since language itself has become one with the rationale behind it. Put another way, economic language is not merely a way of talking *about* education but also a way of *understanding* the very meaning of knowledge and education (Dovermark, 2017).

In the vein of Wittgenstein, the language of the market sets limits on our reality. It does so by providing a framework in which policies, course contents and curriculums are adjusted according to the requirements of economy and financial profit. Tellingly, the following specification was added in the most recent update of the Swedish curriculum for the upper secondary education:

Skolan ska bidra till att alla elever utvecklar kunskaper och förhållningssätt som främjar entreprenörskap, företagande och innovationstänkande vilka ökar elevernas möjligheter till framtida sysselsättning, genom företagande eller anställning.  
(Skolverket, 2011)

One of the most important aspects of education is therefore to provide the learner with an increased ability to adapt herself to the current market economy and to be a productive and successful member within its parameters. Alongside the sort of market orientation exemplified above, educational institutions have begun to cultivate an increasing emphasis on measurable achievements, transparent learning goals and a gradual devaluing of arts and humanities in favour of a more instrumental and vocational approach to learning and knowledge.

In Sweden, the instrumentalist view on education has its roots in the decades preceding the growth of Neo-liberal policies. In fact, as shown by Lundahl and Tveit (2014), it grew out of the natural science model of the 20<sup>th</sup> century assessment practice. The achievement requirements of the Swedish education system are firmly rooted in the quantitative methodology of natural science, which stands in contrast to the very premises of formative assessment. This contradiction, I argue, has helped pave the way for criteria compliance in Sweden.

This is not to say that there has been a conscious effort to instrumentalise the Swedish school system. On the contrary, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, standardised tests and centralised, externally set achievement goals reflected a realistic need to bridge the gap between the school system and society at large, as well as a desire for a socially just, uniform school system. Standardised exams (later to be replaced by “nationella prov”) were constructed on the basis of psychometric tests of behaviour and personality as well as intelligence testing, with focus on group statistics and the measurement of correlations and deviations (Lundahl & Tveit, 2014).

Consequently, certain ideas began to gain hold in the educational paradigm. First, the idea that statistical knowledge and methodological collectivism are sufficient in describing the capabilities and achievements of individual learners. Second, the idea that statistical knowledge about learners as a collective can assist the teacher in her daily teaching and assessment by providing her with an outsider’s view on the achievement levels. In other words, standardised tests and their results represented an objective, raw data free from the noise of subjectivity and the daily buzz of classroom teaching (Lundahl & Tveit, 2014).

I argue that the methodological collectivism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century assessment practice laid a decisive setting in which the political debate and educational reforms of later decades would take place, with problematic consequences for democratic teaching practices and learner autonomy. As noted by Lundahl and Tveit (2014), the educational reform of the 1990s meant an increased emphasis on the explicit aims and predetermined knowledge requirements set centrally by the state to teachers and learners in local municipalities. Following the collectivist tradition, the semantic form of the syllabus knowledge requirements is, in fact, shared by *all* school subjects from geography and physical education to biology and philosophy. Indeed, the result-oriented central management of schools and the specific knowledge requirements of the 2011 syllabus were justified by the scientific legitimacy of statistical knowledge and its ability to assist the teacher in her daily teaching. In other words, schools were thought to be able to compromise between externally set knowledge requirements on one hand and pedagogical content on the other. So-called formative

assessment would come to represent a solution to the dilemma between administrative and pedagogical dimensions of the educational institution, by emphasising both centralised goals and classroom pedagogy *simultaneously* (Lundahl & Tveit, 2014). However, even as formative assessment gained ground in the Swedish educational system, the theoretical polarity between collectivism (shared goals) and individualism (each learner) remained, leaving a space for criteria compliance to crawl through.

To conclude, the outline of the historical background of the Swedish educational system includes not only ideological and political shifts, but also certain epistemological claims about the legitimacy of statistical knowledge in the realm of education and learning. In addition to the Neo-liberal reform of the school system and the economic profit discourse, the assessment practice of the Swedish education system is deeply rooted in collectivist methodology. Together with the education reforms of the 1990s and an increasingly result-oriented management of classroom pedagogy, centrally set knowledge requirements have been integrated into classroom teaching: teachers are expected to answer to the collectively shared achievement goals, while at the same time committing themselves to learner autonomy and student-led teaching. It is against this background that the emergence of criteria compliance can more fully be understood.

### 3. Epistemological dimension

#### 3.1. Fragmentation of knowledge

The reformed syllabus of 2011 is by now an established conceptual reality to a new generation of teachers as well as those practicing the profession in Sweden today. A comparison to another current syllabus is therefore useful and helps shed light on the Swedish syllabus and the criteria therein. The philosophy syllabus in Finland differs quite radically from the Swedish one and provides thus an interesting contrast. As the very language used reflects different kinds of epistemological claims and underlying conceptions of philosophy and learning, it is worth quoting both in detail.

In Sweden, the aims of philosophy teaching are described as attainable knowledge episodes lying in wait to be picked up by the learner (my italics):

1. *Kunskaper om* huvuddragen i olika verklighetsuppfattningar och olika sätt att se på kunskap.
2. *Kunskaper om* vetenskapsteoretiska ståndpunkter och vetenskapliga metoder.
3. *Kunskaper om* värdefilosofi, olika värdeteoretiska ståndpunkter och normativa etiska teorier samt deras tillämpning.
4. *Kunskaper om* existentiella frågor och samhällsfilosofi samt om nutida filosofiska riktningar.
5. *Förmåga att* identifiera filosofiska frågor samt att analysera, förklara och ta ställning till klassiska och nutida filosofiska frågor och teorier med hjälp av relevanta begrepp.
6. *Kunskaper om* språkfilosofi och förmåga att tydliggöra språkliga nyanser med hjälp av språkfilosofiska begrepp samt *förmåga att* värdera argument och att urskilja och genomföra en logisk argumentation.

(Skolverket, 2011)

The Finnish syllabus, in contrast, stresses the complexities and uncertainties that lie behind the different grains of the subject matter (my italics):

- kunna *gestalta* filosofiska problem och tänkbara lösningar på dem inom den filosofiska traditionen och att kunna *tillämpa* problemformuleringarna på olika aktuella frågor
- kunna strukturera, analysera och *bedöma information* begreppsligt, i synnerhet olika påståenden, deras betydelser och motiveringar till dem
- behärska grundläggande logisk argumentation och därigenom lära sig att lita på och kritiskt granska *sitt eget tänkande* samt *reflektera över dess begränsningar* inom olika vetenskapsgrenar och i vardagslivet
- *lära sig att reflektera* över och begreppsligt analysera *större helheter* samt att tänka och *handla* på ett omdömesgillt sätt i såväl etiska frågor som inom andra livsområden, *även då informationen är motstridig eller otillförlitlig*

(Opetushallitus, 2016)

Note that the aims of teaching include not only philosophy per se, as an epistemological entity external to the learner herself, but also the *learner's own thinking and being*. That is, the aim of philosophy is not to present the learner with ready-made, predetermined and predictable knowledge about something which lies outside her own thinking, but rather to teach her to navigate in a

complex reality with the full use of her own intellectual and human potential. As such, the Finnish syllabus falls in line with the democratic educational model described by Nussbaum (2010), in which the learner's own perspective and life experience are considered to be a valuable, indeed essential, part of the pedagogical aims of educational institutions.

Further, in Finnish upper secondary schools, philosophy itself is divided into two obligatory and two voluntary in-depth courses. A general introduction to philosophical thinking and ethics form the obligatory basis; after these, the learner may choose to continue onto political philosophy and epistemology, philosophy of science and metaphysics (Opetushallitus, 2016). This, too, represents a striking difference, since the Swedish upper secondary philosophy consists of only two courses, one of which is obligatory on a limited number of upper secondary programs.

In course content description, the Swedish courses are almost identical to each other, apart from the introductory nature of one and the formal addition of logic in the other (Skolverket, 2011). Both courses stretch over, at the very most but in practice often considerably less than, 50 teaching hours. Despite the narrow timeline, each course includes *all* of the major philosophical areas, that is, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, existentialism as well as current philosophical tendencies. Indeed, in the Swedish upper secondary school philosophy syllabus, the central content ("centralt innehåll") of philosophy is literally *a list* of specialist subjects areas (Skolverket, 2011).

Considering the above, I argue that the Swedish philosophy syllabus is an example of the kind of "modularization" (p. 285) of education discussed by Torrance (2007), where course units are divided into smaller modules for the purposes of economic and administrative effectiveness. As a consequence, philosophy is often taught unit by unit so that learners may acquaint themselves with philosophy of language one week and philosophy of science the next. Certainly, the mere existence of a certain kind of syllabus is not by itself sufficient evidence of any sort of criteria compliance in the empirical reality of the classroom. However, since the syllabus is a part of the result-oriented management of classroom teaching, it does tend to steer how teachers present the teaching content to learners and the way in which learners are able to engage with said content.

To illustrate: a course may begin with the reference theory of meaning and Wittgenstein's language games. Learners are introduced to questions regarding language and reality: does the world around us determine our language or does meaning depend on how words are used? According to my personal experience with upper secondary learners, these questions are found to be quite stimulating and relevant to their own life experience. In one class, when discussing the philosophy of language, students were quick to identify the link between internet propaganda and terrorist acts, as well as the moral implications and possible consequences of an "us versus them" rhetoric. When encouraged to discuss the language used in political slogans or advertising, teenagers instinctively bring up ontological questions about the nature of reality as well as the deeper relationship between words and the world. A discussion on theories of meaning may therefore entail fascinating and enriching reflections and insights on different philosophical grains such as metaphysics and ethics.

However, when course contents become explicit achievement areas whose content and pedagogy are isolated from each other, knowledge and learning become fragmented and, consequently, a holistic perspective on the content is lost (Nordgren et al, 2012, p.83). In practice this often means that learners' questions and budding insights are cut short, and they are left confused as to how their own, spontaneous questions and thoughts relate to different areas of the teaching content. This presents a major challenge for all school subjects and education in general but particularly for a subject such as philosophy which is, per definition, embedded by contextual insight and the ability to draw unforeseen conceptual parallels between seemingly disparate phenomena. In such circumstances, lesson planning and the creation of pedagogical and cognitive coherence throughout the semester becomes, or at least should become, a crucial aspect of the work of the philosophy teacher.



### 3.2. Displayed knowledge or lived understanding

In addition to the aims and content of the philosophy subject, the syllabus provides explicit knowledge requirements (“kunskapskrav”), which all learners are expected to attain. The result-oriented management of the teaching profession as well as the societal norm of explicit and measurable achievements have together created a learning milieu in which grading criteria, and ways to attain it, are deemed increasingly important by both teachers and learners alike.

Admittedly, the Swedish knowledge requirements are not meant to be confused with the content or even the desired aims of the subject matter per se. Thankfully, the Swedish board of education is not going as far as claiming that the *aim* of a philosophy course is to provide the learner with a grade! However, it makes another, almost equally problematic claim. The underlying premise of the syllabus is that the centrally defined knowledge requirements are *sufficient* in measuring the individual abilities and capabilities that take shape and develop in the philosophy classroom.

The claim is wholly rational given the current parameters of a market oriented school system and its emphasis on quantitative methodology and measurable achievements. At the same time, however, it is problematic to such an extent that it can be seen to reflect an insurmountable conflict between a market-oriented education system and the teaching of philosophy. Along with the depiction of philosophy as a list of separate modules and the subsequent fragmentation of philosophy as a school subject, the vision of knowledge criteria as wholly distinct from the ongoing activity of classroom interaction entails an instrumentalist view on learning.

In fact, the collectivist assumption underlying the externally defined achievement criteria stands in direct contrast to the hermeneutic and democratic nature of philosophical activity. As teachers face demands to focus and spend their time on the administrative documentation of learner achievements rather than teaching content and lesson planning, a holistic and formative evaluation of the learner’s knowledge is replaced by the administrative building blocks of course content and knowledge requirements (Almqvist et al, 2017). Learners and teachers are thus deprived of a certain way of being in the world, the opportunity to engage deeply with philosophy as a particular kind of activity. Philosophy is reduced to “philosophy” - a set of predetermined, shared achievement goals and explicit instructions on how to reach them.

Let us take a look at how this reduction looks like in practice. In order to pass an ethics module, a philosophy student might be required to *report, identify and compare* (“redogör”, “identifierar”, “gör jämförelser”) kantian, aristotlian and utilitarian ethical theories *casually* (“översiktligt”). She is to perform *simple* (“enkla”) explanations and analysis of these theories by using *some* (“några”) relevant concepts *with a degree of certainty* (“med viss säkerhet”). The difference between grades E and A lies in the specific words used. To earn a grade A, she must show a wider conceptual repertoire and thus use *several* (“flera”) concepts rather than *some* (“några”). Further, her argumentation must be *well-established* and *nuanced* (“välgrundade”, “nyanserade”) and presented *independently* and *with certainty* (“självständigt”, “med säkerhet”) (Skolverket, 2011).

The knowledge requirements above represent a type of factual knowledge, in this case about the specific content of certain ethical stances, and the manner in which the learner delivers it to the teacher. As crucial as factual knowledge is, though, it is far from enough. Like all teaching, the teaching of philosophy is concerned with getting students to *understand* a certain teaching content rather than to merely show that they know it (Digiovanna, 2014). A student of ethics may be capable of identifying the differences between the ethical theories of Kant, Aristotle and Mill and use various concepts such as categorical imperative, moral obligation, virtue and consequence without actually understanding what they mean. In order to display true understanding of an ethical theory, the learner must be able to *apply* her knowledge in the unpredictable and shifting landscape of life around her. As with all human understanding, philosophical understanding occurs not in a laboratory but as an integral part of life. Ethical standpoints are not found, in a deeper sense, in text

books or even in nuanced discussions in which several ethical theories or concepts are taken up with confidence (indeed, what is confidence?). Rather, they are found, and *understood*, in life as it is lived. Since the unique conceptual, intellectual and emotional perspective of each individual is the very core of philosophy as an intellectual activity, the assessment practices of philosophy teachers cannot be cut off from the life world of the learner without an essential element of philosophical knowledge itself being lost.

Philosophical insights require, therefore, an open and democratic classroom climate in which different individuals with different personalities and backgrounds are able to freely reflect and exchange thoughts. An individual learner's path to philosophical understanding may differ greatly from that of her fellow student, both in terms of the time it takes and the cognitive steps taken during the individual learning process. The understanding of Rawls' veil of ignorance, for example, is greatly affected by the personal life world of each individual learner. During my teacher training, I have had the pleasure of witnessing lively and nuanced discussions on meritocracy as well as communitarian criticisms of contract theories, all stemming spontaneously from the way in which young people as individuals experience their own place in society and the world at large.

In the Swedish school context, the life world of the individual learner is indeed deemed an essential aspect of the school milieu. As previously noted, formative assessment has come to represent a compromise where both knowledge requirements and the specific life world of individual learners could be merged into a pragmatic pedagogical whole (Lundahl & Tveit, 2014). However, due to the constraints set by result orientation and explicit knowledge requirements, formative assessment is often difficult to adhere to in practice. There is an intrinsic difference between the pedagogical parameters required of formative assessment proper on one hand and market-oriented efficiency on the other; in order to engage with the learner in a fully formative manner, the teacher's feedback must take into account not only the explicit learning goals of the course, but also the conceptual and cognitive nature of the teaching content, the life world of the learner and classroom climate, to name but a few aspects (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In the case of philosophy, the conceptual and cognitive core of the teaching content is that it takes time and that understanding is often preceded by a period of non-understanding and confusion. This is, of course, not exclusive to philosophy. Understanding per se can be described as something deeper than a mere display of knowledge; during the early stages of learning, previously established knowledge base "meets" a new content and must either be adapted to new knowledge or be abandoned altogether. Consequently, understanding requires patience and an openness about the chaotic and confusing nature of the learning process (Klapp, p. 158). Indeed, in order to understand something, we must be bold enough to be wrong and to make mistakes - we must realise that there is something that we do not yet quite understand. Explicit focus on achievement goals bypasses this crucial stage of learning, by emphasising the role of displayed knowledge instead.

There is a clear parallel between philosophy and creative arts, since both areas of study require an open climate and the courage to make mistakes. The study of Scandinavian music education, by Almqvist et al (2017), shows how classroom climate is affected by attainment focus and knowledge requirements. Music students show increased anxiety regarding the creative process for fear of not playing well enough and thereby not fulfilling the attainment goals specified in the syllabus. Philosophy, like music, requires a certain emotional audaciousness, willingness to expose one's own vulnerability and experiment without necessarily having an exact idea of the final destination. For this reason, the philosophy classroom must provide learners a safe space in which they feel free to engage with their own thoughts as well as those of others, without having to worry about a predetermined set of achievement criteria. The conclusion by Almqvist et al (2017) is that explicit knowledge requirements risk diminishing the experimental and emotional aspect of music into a display of surface-level technical knowledge; the same conclusion may well be applied to philosophy. In philosophy classrooms, explicit knowledge requirements lead to performance anxiety and fear of failure, manifested as an unwillingness to fully engage with philosophical propositions or to freely and fearlessly formulate new propositions of one's own.

Formative assessment, it should be borne in mind, aims to provide the learner with information about not only the final destination, but also the learner's current position and the steps she needs to take in order to get there. Indeed, formative assessment is rather *complex*, since it takes into account not only the content of teaching in all its depth, but also the specific epistemological perspective and cognitive needs of the learner (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Bearing in mind that "assessment for learning" is used to form rather than summarise the learner's performance, the aim is to help the learner to find her way towards a more nuanced understanding of, say, different ethical theories and thus strengthen her ability to identify their relevance in new and unforeseen contexts.

Let us consider a concrete example. A student might embark upon an ethics course by reading about Kant's categorical imperative, Aristotle's virtue ethics and Mill's utilitarianism. Following the initial introduction stage, the learner might then take part in an oral discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of said ethical theories. In this case, a formative assessment practice would mean information given to the learner after the discussion and before the occurrence of the next teaching episode. The learner could, for instance, be informed whether she has defined the theories correctly or whether there are some factual misunderstandings. I once had the opportunity to evaluate learners' understanding of ethics after they had taken part in a discussion on Greta Thunberg and climate change. A pattern emerged in the learners' answers, namely, that the juridical obligation to go to school was confused with a moral obligation. Formative assessment is helpful in these sort of instances, since it provides an opportunity to prompt the learner: why do you think Thunberg should go to school? Apart from the Swedish law, can you think of some other things she might feel an obligation toward? How might we justify these obligations? And so on.

Understanding a philosophical claim widens the playing field. It makes the learner capable of applying the knowledge she has gained in new, unforeseen situations as well as forming whole new philosophical propositions and questions of her own. Furthermore, true understanding always comes with an element of unpredictability. We can never know *exactly* what an ethical theory implies or means, since our lived human experience is unpredictable. Understanding cannot, therefore, be captured by predetermined and explicitly defined knowledge requirements such as grading criteria.

Unfortunately, though, in an attempt to deal with the result-oriented administrative demands as well as the individual plurality of the classroom, teachers risk compromising both philosophy as a teaching content and the internal learning process of the person studying it. A predetermined and externally defined assessment criteria are favoured at the cost of a more interactive and meta-cognitive approach; "assessment for learning" is in practice replaced by "assessment as learning" (Torrance, 2007, p. 281). A teacher may literally tick off the number of ethical concepts used in a discussion and then provide the learner with task instructions ("you need to read the chapter again so you get a better idea of utilitarianism") disguised as feedback. The personal and unpredictable nature of philosophical understanding is tamed, so to speak, and replaced by the safety of explicit goal descriptions and instructions on how to attain it.

Criteria compliance narrows down the learning process by not only fragmenting the teaching content into smaller units and modules, but also by bypassing the pedagogical complexity of feedback and assessment and replacing it with detailed task instructions. In the philosophy class, this means that the situational information about the learner's current knowledge in relation to a yet-to-be-attained, desired knowledge is adjusted to the high paced demands of administrative documentation.

This is not to say that philosophical knowledge cannot at all be assessed or even measured. A curious toddler with an active imagination has arguably less philosophical knowledge (and understanding) than a PhD student in philosophy, and we should be able to show why this is so! What must be borne in mind, however, is that the idea of collectively applied knowledge definitions differs from both philosophy as a hermeneutic activity and the pedagogical reality of classroom teachers. The knowledge requirements in the Swedish syllabus stem from the positivist assumption that statistical knowledge is a sufficient method when measuring the thoughts and abilities of

individual human beings. In the classrooms, the individual's yet-to-be-attained knowledge is stripped off all unpredictability and clothed in explicitly formulated task goals, so that the learner's process, performances and achievements may be articulated and documented as clearly and effectively as possible. Therefore, the claim that an externally set grading scale is a pedagogically feasible way of measuring philosophical knowledge underestimates the complexity of both philosophical understanding and the person in the process of acquiring it.

#### 4. Professional dimension

The idea of criteria compliance may seem counter-intuitive when considering the Swedish educational discourse in which democracy, communicative abilities, learner autonomy and formative assessment are frequently lifted as essential cornerstones of the values of the educational institution. However, as I hope to have shown, certain discourse itself is no proof of empirical practice. On the contrary, it may disguise and justify a wholly different reality where criteria fulfillment, task completion and assignment documentation rule the roost *in the name of* learner autonomy and knowledge (Torrance, 2007). As the conceptual framework of the discourse is increasingly defined and steered by organisational and economic interests and controlled result achievements rather than democratic and humanistic ideals, the complexity of the learning process and the professional experience and knowledge of classroom teachers are, in fact, left aside and ignored (Parding, 2010). Like all language, the market discourse makes certain utterances possible while rendering others outside the communicative realm. As education and knowledge itself are increasingly understood in terms of economic competition and effectiveness, the complexity of the teaching profession is rendered invisible and irrelevant (Dovemark, 2017; Parding, 2010; Frelin, 2013).

Centrally defined knowledge criteria are, however, far from self-evident or logical. It is fully possible to integrate assessment practice into the specific aims and contents of philosophy as a subject matter without having any *predetermined* definitions of what *exactly* is required for philosophical knowledge to emerge. The Swedish syllabus should therefore not be considered as a logically necessary part of the profession, nor should it be considered to be utterly devoid of any social or temporal dimension. Its Finnish counterpart, for example, includes no explicit knowledge requirements whatsoever; instead, assessment is defined as an integral part of the teaching content and the thinking process of the learner. In the Finnish syllabus, assessment is to be provided in a variety of forms and its main aim is to help the learner to critically examine her own thinking and to obtain meta-cognitive skills to further her learning (Opetushallitus, 2016). Crucially, evaluation and assessment of the philosophy learner are deemed as a fundamental part of *the subject matter itself*. Learner assessment is thus entirely integrated into the very practice of philosophy and the autonomous learning process of the individual learner.

In likeness with the way in which the stipulations of the aims and content steer the presentation of the teaching content to the learners, the syllabus' knowledge requirements tend to affect the way in which formative assessment is framed in Swedish classrooms. The life world of the learner as well as the democratic and interpretive depth of philosophical understanding are bypassed in favour of task-based instructions and explicit attainment goals. Further, teachers are encouraged to adhere to external attainment goals rather than the plurality of individual voices in the classroom. The difficulty of bridging a gap between administrative demands on one hand and learner autonomy on the other illustrates thus the professional dimension of criteria compliance. In the face of a growing focus on explicit learning goals and the documentation of their attainment, teachers of philosophy risk losing their professional autonomy.

Considering the above, criteria compliance is best understood as a way of being in the teaching profession. It should be viewed as an aspect of "governmentality" (Foucault, 1978, p. 87), a *behavioural habit* that takes place within a certain political and economical social order and justifies that very order by producing and reproducing certain ways of thinking and being (Foucault, 1978).

Given the scientific legitimacy of statistical knowledge in the Swedish assessment practice and the market discourse of recent decades, the habits of teaching and learning have come to be governed by goal focus and economic efficiency. The uncontrollable nature of curiosity and individual learning paths are thus tamed and replaced by task fulfillment and compliance to shared goals. The creativity and unpredictability that come with understanding are in turn suppressed by the administrative efficiency of predetermined knowledge criteria and increased efforts to fulfill them.

Considering criteria compliance as a set of habits within a network of human relations (Foucault, 1978), we are faced with the question of resistance. Given that the parameters of educational commodification and an increased focus on vocational aims are widely considered to be in direct opposition to the values and interests of those involved with philosophy (MacMahon, 1976; Wright & Lauer, 2012), is there any room for maneuver? Can we imagine, let alone practice, alternative ways of being teachers in an education system geared towards economic and administrative efficiency? Can the practice of philosophy and the buzz of human life be redeemed in classrooms governed by predetermined criteria and the attainment of measurable results?

## 5. Discussion – in defence of philosophy teaching

The immediate, most practical and perhaps most obvious answer coming to mind is to simply deny the relevance of the steering document and, once the classroom door is shut, embrace one's individual freedom as a teacher. However, there are problems with this stance. Firstly, the teacher is never alone in the classroom. She shares the space with several other individuals, namely, the learners. As much as the teacher might ignore the fragmented modularisation and the grading criteria of the syllabus, her pupils may very well disapprove of such rebellion. Indeed, today's upper secondary school students are quite set in the business of passing exams and getting grades. "What good is this course for?" and "what do I need to do in order to pass?" might be the most challenging philosophical questions a teacher of philosophy must face during the entire semester.

Indeed, questions of relevance and assessment validity are worth asking and answering time and time again, throughout the weeks, months, years and decades – not merely by individual philosophy teachers in their solitude, but more importantly, by philosophy teachers as a community. As things stand today, there is a lack of such a community in Sweden, as teachers of philosophy do not have a shared collegial platform on which to exchange experiences and discuss professional challenges. Furthermore, there is a systematic gap between philosophy as a field of research and philosophy as a subject of teaching. As a consequence, the philosophy teacher practices her profession very much in isolation from the community of philosophy scholars (Bloch-Schulman & Carr, 2016). To put it bluntly, the philosophy teacher today is faced with an overwhelming sense of solitude and isolation, which makes it all the harder to resist the habitual constraints of the "attainment-oriented culture" (Torrance, 2007, p. 292) and its focus on criteria compliance. With that in mind, ignoring the one thing philosophy teachers do have in common seems counterproductive. I argue, therefore, that teachers should tackle the syllabus together and thereby gain professional control over it. This way, they are better able to shield both their own profession as well as philosophy per se (what is one without the other?) from the current tide of the profit-oriented education model and the overall devaluing of humanities. What is needed is not more shut classroom doors and individual defiance, but a revival of a communal aspect of teaching (Bloch-Schulmann & Carr, 2016).

The content, aims and knowledge requirements of the syllabus make certain *claims* regarding what philosophy is and by what method its quality may be determined. However, as MacMahon (1976) has poignantly noted, only those with the relevant competence are entitled to such claims. Thus, the right and responsibility to making claims about philosophy in school rests solely on those who teach philosophy in schools. In addition, the semantic overload of the syllabus raises serious questions about the reliability and validity of the assessment practices.

These claims and issues can only be tackled by defining clearly what is at stake. What *are*

the aims and content of philosophy, according to those competent to teach it? Imagine a situation where a whole society is ignorant of what music is or what musical instruments there might exist, apart from a few musicians. One of these musicians is then commissioned to provide the rest of her fellow citizens with knowledge of musical expression, with the condition that she only has one trumpet with a built-in A major scale. For the public, “music” would come to mean major scale trumpet playing, yet they would not be provided with full knowledge of the capacity of musical expression. Over time, even the non-trumpet playing musicians would come to identify “music” as trumpet playing in A major and consequently lay down their instruments in the belief that they are not up to the desired standard of good musicianship. Being an intrinsic human activity, music would no doubt go through a revival after some generations, but in the meantime valuable aesthetic experiences and personal development will have been lost. In a similar manner, an artificial adaptation of critical and abstract thinking skills to current needs and demands of economic efficiency or entrepreneurship strips philosophy of meaning.

The best way to answer questions of modern day relevance of philosophy is to claim ownership of and, indeed, *hone* its abstract and creative nature - despite the fact that it will shock and disappoint those expecting the sound of an A major trumpet. In the vein of McMahon (1976), it is not up to the politicians or even students to decide what philosophy is for. They should be allowed to draw their own conclusions, but only *after* being provided with a full and varied education that does justice to the hermeneutic depth and intrinsic democratic potential of philosophy (Nussbaum, 2010).

To be less abstruse: in times of quantitative measurements and demands for explicitly defined achievement results, the question of relevance can only be answered if philosophy teachers themselves know *what* it is they are in fact teaching. Wright and Lauer (2012), in their study on assessment and learning in philosophy, come to the conclusion that it is not the measuring itself that should (indeed, could) be questioned, but rather the validity of the measurements. It is a fair argument, particularly when considering the widespread habitual and conceptual reality of criteria compliance and the isolation and solitude of philosophy teachers as individuals and as a group. Armed with robust goal definitions shared by all, philosophy teachers are better equipped to defend their own professional integrity and autonomy from the claims and demands of outsiders. Instead of resisting grading, it should be approached systematically and constructively, that is, first considering the full scope of philosophy and then coming to an agreement upon the aims and goals of our teaching (Wright & Lauer, 2012). Only after such a professional collaboration is it possible to resist the behavioural space of criteria compliance and an all too heavy emphasis on centrally defined knowledge requirements.

It must be borne in mind that the aims and content of philosophy cannot be cut off from the assessment practice. The overwhelming amount of verbs, adjectives and adverbs in the current syllabus presents all teachers with the challenge of finding a common criteria ground on which to base a valid and reliable assessment practice. There are, in fact, various interpretative stages in the assessment process, the initial reading of the syllabus being but one and the assessment of the learner performance another. Additionally, and just as importantly, the assessed activities themselves are planned according to the individual teacher’s interpretation of the syllabus (Jönsson & Thornberg, 2014). What sort of question, exam or exercise is needed in order to assess the learners’ understanding of ethical theories? In order to evaluate a student’s understanding of an ethical theory, the evaluator must have made clear to herself what an ethical theory *is* and *why* she thinks the learner should understand it. A valid assessment depends, then, entirely on how the teacher interprets the aim and content of philosophy. To be used as a basis for a scientifically valid and reliable teaching praxis, the syllabus must be systematically and regularly discussed among teachers of philosophy. Put simply, teachers must reach a strengthened consensus over the various interpretative stages involved.

Crucially, this is not merely a question of coming to terms with the language of the syllabus. The multitude of interpretations and estimations is not simply a question of semantics; it is to do

with the very content knowledge professed by philosophy teachers. To discuss different views gives teachers an opportunity to justify their own assessments, reflect upon conflicting views and thus deepen their understanding of the taught subject (Jönsson & Thornberg, 2014). In this way, both teaching and assessment are deeply hermeneutic practices and thus necessarily intertwined.

Therefore, should assessment practice be valid and reliable, it cannot be separated from the communal aspect of teaching. It must be based on understanding rather than compliance – and as with all understanding, it must be preceded by a period of non-understanding, questioning and interpersonal exchange of thoughts. Philosophy teachers must therefore guard the complexity and autonomy of their profession by taking every opportunity to reach out from their individual solitude and exchange ideas and thoughts with colleagues. There is a wealth of wisdom in other people that cannot be found in any syllabus, let alone externally defined knowledge criteria. Furthermore, the very specific experience of teaching philosophy in a classroom is a valuable resource for human development and, as such, a powerful shield against the constraints and demands of the market discourse.

Philosophy teachers, in their training as well as their daily work, gain and profess philosophical content knowledge about what philosophy is and how to engage with it. Since teaching philosophy requires not only knowledge of philosophy, but also knowledge of its pedagogical dimension (Bloch-Schulman & Carr, 2016), limiting the competence of teachers to merely the first type of knowledge would ignore the complexity of philosophy teaching. In fact, it would miss the very crux of the profession, because it is the pedagogical content which forms the very core of philosophy teaching and differentiates the teacher from a scholar. In what ways are different ethical theories difficult for a teenager to understand? What sort of cognitive and conceptual difficulties lie behind her tendency to mistake juridical obligations for moral ones? Are there specific “threshold concepts” (Bloch-Schulman & Carr, 2016, p. 31) which are crucial to take up prior to the teaching of ethical theories? Such questions and how to apply their answers in the classroom consisting of several individuals each with their own life experience and intellectual and emotional makeup, is the very essence of teaching philosophy. As such, to teach philosophy is a profession which requires both intellectual vigour and interpersonal sensibility.

Teachers of philosophy should take pride in both the abstract nature of philosophy and the complexity of the teaching profession. The gap between philosophy as a field of academic research and as an upper secondary school subject should be overcome and a sense of community among everyone involved with philosophy should be revived and encouraged, not least in a country like Sweden where philosophy does not enjoy the respect and high esteem that it deserves. If the intrinsic value of philosophy is to survive the instrumentalist strains of a market-oriented education system, more academic research on the specific pedagogical knowledge of philosophy teachers is needed. Indeed, the valuable pedagogical and democratic perspective of classroom philosophy is to be more fully acknowledged by philosophy scholars and teachers alike.

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