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HILDA TABA

(1902–1967)

*Edgar Krull**

Although Ernest Hemingway once stated that in each part of the world you could meet at least one Estonian, it is a rare occurrence when the existence and achievements of great personalities originating from this 1 million strong nation are associated with their native country and nation in the minds of their foreign colleagues. In this sense Hilda Taba is not an exception. She is known worldwide as an outstanding American educator and curriculum theorist, but very few know that she was born, brought up and educated in Estonia. Probably, even more surprising is the fact that Taba, belonging to the list of the most outstanding educators of the twentieth century and whose academic work climaxed with the publication of the monograph *Curriculum development: theory and practice* (1962), remained unknown in her native country for decades. So, in spite of the fact that Taba's approach to curriculum design spread throughout the world and her monograph took an honourable position on the bookshelves of European education libraries in the 1960s, her educational ideas reached Estonian educators only at the end of the 1980s.

The above-mentioned circumstance is one of the many controversial aspects in Hilda Taba's life that evidently played an important role in her development as a scientist and gave a unique colouration to her educational ideas. Another controversy, undoubtedly playing a major role in the formation of Taba's theoretical ideas and thinking, was the collision between German and American educational traditions that she experienced in her studies of pedagogy. For instance, the undergraduate educational preparation that she received at the University of Tartu had a strong disposition towards German didactics and educational philosophy.¹ However, her subsequent post-graduate studies in the United States of America were strongly influenced by the ideas of progressive education, which she came to admire and which became a cornerstone of her educational thinking.

It remains unknown whether Taba had dreamed of pursuing her academic career in the United States or of returning to Estonia after her post-graduate studies abroad. However, the fact that she competed for the professorship in education at the University of Tartu in 1931 rather

points to her intention to bind her working career and life to Estonia. These plans did not come about, as she was not selected for this position. But what is even more amazing was that she could not find any other job in Estonia worthy of her qualifications. So, the author of the doctoral dissertation *The dynamics of education: a methodology of progressive educational thought* (1932), which later earned wide recognition among educators, decided to return to North America. This unexpected change in her plans and the subsequent move caused Taba to experience serious difficulties and misery at the beginning of her career. Hilda Taba's road to excellence was in some parts due to chance, her enormous desire to succeed and the favourable conditions for educational research in the United States, and she became one of the brightest stars in the educational constellation of the 1960s. Nowadays, her work in the field of curriculum design, alongside that of Ralph W. Tyler, belongs to the classics of pedagogy. Several contemporary authors still frequently refer to Hilda Taba's ideas and base their work in the field of curriculum theory and practice on her conceptions developed decades ago (see, for example, articles in the handbooks edited by Shaver, 1991; and Leawy, 1991; and in academic journals by Klarin, 1992; Fraenkel, 1994; Parry et al., 2000). There are over 100 recent articles and monographs referring to the work of Taba in the ERIC database. Furthermore, countless references to her name and educational ideas on the Internet are additional proof that her academic contribution to the field of education has lasting value.

Some ideas about Hilda Taba as a person can be found in Elizabeth H. Brady's (1992) commemorative article. Brady, one of her closest colleagues during the days of intergroup education projects (1945–51), wrote: 'Taba was very energetic, enthusiastic, active, seemingly tireless; she led life at a tempo which sometimes led to misunderstandings and often wore out friends and staff. She was small in stature, perky in manners and in dress, and always intent on the next thing' (Brady, 1992, p. 9).

Hilda Taba's childhood and university studies

The future prominent educator Hilda Taba was born in Kooraste, a small village in the present Põlva county, in south-east Estonia, on 7 December 1902. She was the first of nine children of Robert Taba, a schoolmaster. Hilda was first educated at her father's elementary school, and then at the local parish school.

In 1921, after graduating from Võru High School for Girls, she decided to become an elementary school-teacher. In the autumn of the same year Hilda passed the final examination for

elementary teacher certification at the Didactic Seminar of Tartu, but she did not begin work at a primary school. Instead, she became a student of economics at the University of Tartu. Economics, however, did not appeal to Taba and a year later she applied to be transferred to the Faculty of Philosophy where she majored in history and education. As her father's schoolmaster income was too modest for maintaining a big family and supporting Hilda's studies, the tutoring of young students became her main after-school activity and source of income. A dedication in her dissertation to Maria Raudsepp, a pupil she coached during her university studies in Tartu, commemorates this aspect of Taba's biography.

After graduating from the University of Tartu in 1926, Taba had the opportunity to undertake her post-graduate studies in the United States, supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Her excellent knowledge of educational subjects acquired at Tartu University made it possible for her to complete a master's degree at Bryn Mawr College in a year. During her studies at Bryn Mawr, she started to visit progressive schools and became interested in the practice of the Dalton Plan (Klarin, 1989). Surveying American educational literature, Taba discovered *Fundamentals of education* by Boyd. H. Bode (1921), a then widely known author and educator in the United States. Taba was very impressed by Bode's (1873–1953) approach and she grew interested in the philosophy of progressive education. In particular, she enjoyed the child-centredness and the novelty and flexibility of this educational approach.

In 1927 she applied for doctoral studies in educational philosophy at Columbia University. During the following five years of studies Taba met many American scientists of world renown, among them the psychologist E.L. Thorndike (1874–1949), the educator and historian P. Monroe (1869–1947), the sociologist G.C. Gounts, and the founder of the Winnetka Plan, C. Washburne (1889–1968). Nevertheless, the person to affect Hilda Taba's educational thinking most was John Dewey (1859–1952)—a philosopher and educator with a global reputation, and one of the initiators of the progressive educational movement whose lectures she attended and whose writings she studied carefully (Isham, 1982; Taba, 1932, p. vii). The principal advisor of her doctoral work became William H. Kilpatrick (1871–1965), one of John Dewey's colleagues, known in the history of education as the initiator of the project method. Kilpatrick ended his foreword to Taba's dissertation with prophetic words about its author, stating that 'hard will be that reader to please and far advanced his previous thinking who does not leave this book feeling distinctly indebted to its very capable author' (Kilpatrick, 1932). Kilpatrick was right in assessing the value of this work, and his opinion was proved by the fact that some fifty years later Telegraph Books reprinted the monograph in 1980.

In 1931, having completed her doctoral dissertation, Hilda Taba returned to Estonia in order to apply for the professorship left vacant through the untimely death of Peeter Põld, her professor of education when she studied at the University of Tartu. Unfortunately, Taba was not elected and evidently was badly disappointed. Although she found employment at a college of household economics in Estonia, she decided shortly thereafter to return to the United States.

Taba's scientific career in the United States

Once back in the United States, Hilda Taba experienced serious hardships. In the beginning she did not find any employment corresponding to her qualifications, and so she had to undertake some casual jobs. Later, she worked for a wealthy American family coaching their children—an activity she was used to already in Estonia. In addition, her stay in the United States was complicated by the fact that she did not have American citizenship, and because of this she was permanently threatened with deportation by the Department of Immigration. Finally, in 1933 Taba was given a post as a German teacher, and later on she became the director of curriculum in the Dalton School,² in Ohio.

It is of interest to mention that Hilda Taba became involved in educational research by a lucky chance. She was hired just at the start of the Eight-Year Study³ in which the Dalton School was actively involved. Taba's participation in the study brought her together with Ralph Tyler, who was the head of the field evaluation staff of the study.

Tyler was impressed by her devotion to scientific research and by her profound understanding of educational processes, and he hired Taba to form part of the evaluation staff (located at the University of Ohio) as the co-ordinator of the social studies curriculum. In 1939, when the evaluation staff was transferred to the University of Chicago, Taba became the director of the curriculum laboratory, which she headed until 1945.

By the mid-1940s Taba had become a capable and widely recognized educational researcher. She initiated, designed and directed several research projects centred on two major topics: intergroup education (1945–51); and the reorganization and development of social studies curricula in California (1951–67). Hilda Taba also served as a consultant to many local institutions and school districts, and she took part in UNESCO seminars in Paris and Brazil (Harshbarger, 1978).

Intergroup education became topical in the United States following the Second World War. The reorganization of American industry for the needs of war had caused a significant migration of workers from rural areas to the cities. As a result, major changes in people's way of life and in the composition of their neighbourhoods took place, and these changes contributed to a growing tension. In 1944, quite serious interracial riots took place in Detroit. This was the drop that made the cup run over, and more than 400 public organizations were founded in the United States in response to these events (Klarin, 1989). Taba's research group submitted to the American Council on Education one of many proposals aimed at the investigation of possibilities for increasing the level of tolerance between students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The Intergroup Education Project was accepted and launched in New York City in 1945. Hilda Taba became its director. The success of the experimental project led to the establishment of the Center of Intergroup Education at the University of Chicago, which was headed by Taba (1948–51).

The study began with an extensive investigation of the socio-psychological causes of intergroup tensions, and it ended with the approval of school curricula for intergroup tolerance education between students. These curricula focused on the four main issues related to social life that proved to be essential in the formation of stereotypes and prejudices: (1) differences in the style of family life; (2) differences in the life-styles of the communities; (3) ignorance of American culture; and (4) development of peaceful relations between individuals (Taba et al., 1952). In order to foster better knowledge, understanding and attitudes in these life spheres, special education programmes were developed. For example, the education programme aimed at the development of personal relations taught children how to handle conflicts without resorting to violence. From today's perspective, intergroup education can be considered as a forerunner of intercultural or multicultural education. When taking a closer look at Taba's work on intergroup education, it is difficult to disagree with Elizabeth H. Brady's comment that one of Taba's 'major contributions was to recognize that social science could provide a strong foundation for education, with sociology, social pedagogy and cultural anthropology in particular illuminating issues in human relations education' (Brady, 1992, p. 8).

The second and final period of Hilda Taba's independent scientific career began in 1951, when she accepted a proposal for the reorganization and development of social studies curricula in Contra Costa county, in the San Francisco Bay area. At the same time, she became a full professor of education at San Francisco State University. This was the period when her expertise in the areas of curriculum design, intergroup education and development of cognitive processes won her international recognition.

Mary Durkin (1993, p. ix), the former social studies curriculum co-ordinator for the county, describes the beginning of Taba's research and its character in Contra Costa as follows:

It was a fortunate coincidence that Dr. Hilda Taba joined the staff of San Francisco State at the same time as the Director of Curriculum of Contra Costa County Department of Education in California was searching for a consultant whose mode of thinking was compatible with staff's to write a social studies teacher guide.

The Contra Costa County Board of Education provided Taba with ample time by not setting a deadline for the guides. Seven years were spent on two studies of children's thinking and the guides. The process included conferences with content specialists, in-service workshops, and the writing, testing and rewriting of the guides.

In her turn, Taba (1962, p. 482) saw the problems connected with the social studies curriculum and the reasons for selecting a specific strategy for curriculum development in this way:

The analysis of the problems required change in the curriculum and the approach to making this change was made by the county curriculum staff in co-operation with the school principals. This analysis suggested that the usual efforts—institutes, lectures, required attendance of college classes—had not over a period of years produced much curriculum improvement and did not seem promising for making changes in the structure of curriculum. Furthermore, since the county staff had been responsible for developing curriculum guides and units, the teachers in various districts tended to regard the county as authoritarian and it was difficult to kindle their initiative for curriculum improvement. For these reasons, the county staff was searching for some kind of grass-roots approach that would promise greater participation and involvement in the whole process of curriculum improvement, and at the same time improve the human relations between the schools and the county office.

So, the beginning of the study was largely concerned with the identification and analysis of teachers' problems in the field of social studies. The teachers, after they had identified mismatches in the curricula they were using with their expectations for them, were asked to develop their own teaching/learning units. As the teachers' expertise was not sufficient for curriculum development, seminars and consultancy sessions were organized. The members of the research team primarily provided this kind of in-service training for co-operating teachers. Later on, this function was gradually taken over by the county staff as their expertise through in-service training that was especially organized for them increased. Teachers who developed the new

teaching/learning units first checked them in school practice. Then they underwent a critical revision and were again tried out, but this time by a larger number of teachers. This procedure was applied many times, until results satisfying the needs of teachers at different schools were achieved. Usually, the curriculum for an entire grade involved from five to eight units.

The planning of general steps and procedures of curriculum development were the responsibility of Taba's research team at the beginning of the study. Then, similarly to the development of teacher guidance abilities, this function was gradually taken over by the county curriculum staff as its expertise increased. Consequently, the research programme was aimed at the re-education of the whole staff and at producing pilot models of curriculum development and teaching (Taba, 1962, p. 482–93).

The main purpose of the study was to provide a flexible model of curriculum renewal, based on conjoint efforts of practising teachers and educational administrators responsible for school curricula. It is important to mention that many ideas underlying Taba's curriculum model, such as the notion of a 'spiral' curriculum, inductive teaching strategies for the development of concepts, generalizations and applications; organization of content on three levels—key ideas, organizational ideas and facts—and her general strategy for developing thinking through the social studies curriculum significantly influenced curriculum developers during the 1960s and early 1970s. Many general principles and ideas of curriculum design developed by Hilda Taba belong to the foundations of modern curriculum theories, and are frequently referred to by other authors.

Many of Taba's ideas on curriculum design can be considered as a further elaboration of Ralph Tyler's rather psychological principles of curriculum development: attributing to them a more pedagogical and practical nature. This is well evidenced by reconsidering the meaning and nature of Tyler's (1969) rationale of curriculum design: (1) stating educational objectives; (2) selecting and (3) organizing learning experiences; and (4) assessing the achievement of objectives. In her version, Taba introduced notions of multiple educational objectives and four distinct categories of objectives (basic knowledge, thinking skills, attitudes and academic skills). This approach allowed Hilda Taba to relate specific teaching/learning strategies to each category of objectives. In this sense, her classification of educational objectives has some similarities with Gagné's (1985) system of learning outcomes and the conditions of learning which explain the ways for reaching desired outcomes. Also, the sophisticated classification of educational objectives allowed Taba to give to Tyler's notion of learning experiences a more specific and practical meaning by considering separately the selection and organization of instructional

content and strategies of learning. As stated by Hilda Taba in her teacher handbook for elementary social studies:

the selection and organization of content implements only one of the four areas of objectives—that of knowledge. The selection of content does not develop the techniques and skills for thinking, change patterns of attitudes and feelings, or produce academic and social skills. These objectives only can be achieved by the way in which the learning experiences are planned and conducted in the classroom. [...] Achievement of three of the four categories of objectives depends on the nature of learning experiences rather than on the content (Taba, 1967, p. 11).

Hilda Taba died unexpectedly on 6 July 1967, at the peak of her academic capabilities and power.

Some of Taba's philosophical ideas on curriculum development

There are many academic papers in English and in Estonian describing Hilda Taba's ideas and research on specific areas of education. But there are fewer writings on Taba's general principles and beliefs regarding research and education that made her work unique, inventive and original. Many of the ideas that made Taba world famous kept developing and evolving gradually throughout her career. A preliminary, and therefore incomplete, analysis of her scientific heritage suggests at least four principles that seem to govern her vision of curriculum theory and curriculum development (Krull & Kurm, 1996, p. 11–12):

1. Social processes, including the socialization of human beings, are not linear, and they cannot be modelled through linear planning. In other words, learning and development of personality cannot be considered as one-way processes of establishing educational aims and deriving specific objectives from an ideal of education proclaimed or imagined by some authority.
2. Social institutions, among them school curricula and programmes, are more likely to be effectively rearranged if, instead of the common way of administrative reorganization—from top to bottom—a well-founded and co-ordinated system of development from bottom to top can be used.
3. The development of new curricula and programmes is more effective if it is based on the principles of democratic guidance and on the well-founded distribution of work. The emphasis is on the partnership based on competence, and not on administration.
4. The renovation of curricula and programmes is not a short-term effort but a long process, lasting for years.

The principle of considering social processes as non-linear is the most important one, and it probably governs all of Hilda Taba's educational work. Taba pointed out already in her doctoral dissertation that 'ends and aims, as they are in actual life, seldom present themselves as simple and easily comprehensible units' (1932, p. 142) and, therefore, 'a purposive act must be regarded primarily as an outgrowth of previous activity and not as an independent unit starting and activating because of some end or purpose clamoring for actualization' (1932, p. 143). Applying the principle to curriculum design, this means that it is unreal and impossible to set up rigid general goals of education from which more specified objectives would be derived for a concrete plan. The general goals are also subject to modification in order to become adapted to the real circumstances, whereby they are dependent more or less on the content and character of the educational step planned.

The second principle of the efficiency of the bottom-up approach suggests the most convenient way to help individuals and human social organizations to accept and to adapt to new situations and ideas. Taba's view can be well interpreted in the light of Donald Schön's concept of 'dynamic conservatism' (Schön, 1971), which expresses the tendency of individuals and social organizations to oppose energetically changes that derange or offend their convictions and understandings by building up structures and mechanisms that will interfere with these changes. The expected changes in the individual or social consciousness will take place only if individuals or groups, under pressure to introduce these changes, conserve or acquire the ability to learn. So, the changes and learning underlying it take place more easily, and meet less opposition if they are not imposed by the central institutions but are initiated in the periphery, and gradually spread all over the structure.

The third and fourth principles underline the necessity for the democratic guidance of curriculum development and the long-term nature of this process, and are essentially derived from the first two principles. They are explicitly spelled out in the description of the organization for social studies curriculum development used in Contra Costa county (see Taba, 1962, p. 482–89)

Probably the most characteristic feature of Hilda Taba's educational thinking was the ability to see the forest for the trees, pointing to her capability to discriminate between the essential and the non-essential or the important and the unimportant. She was never misled by the outside lustre of an idea even when facing the most advanced educational innovations of the day, and she always scrutinized them for their educational purpose or value. An episode described in the commemorative article by A.L. Costa and R.A. Loveall (2002) is good evidence of this aspect

of Taba's thinking. Taba, when visiting a prestigious American university in the 1960s, was led to a computer centre where a huge mainframe computer was used for developing one of the first teaching machines. Her judgement on the value of this enterprise was fast and rather disappointing: 'Million-dollar machine, ten cent idea' (Costa & Loveall, 2002, p. 61).

Some concluding remarks

There is a popular saying that a prophet is without honour in his own land. Hilda Taba is not an exception, and it was only as late as twenty years after her death that she started to become known and recognized as an outstanding educator in her native land. Hilda Taba's educational talent blossomed in the United States, where she is definitely an outstanding American educator. There is only one known article—'Governing tendencies in American education' (Taba, 1931)—published in the Estonian journal of education *Kasvatus* in 1931. Since then, Hilda Taba has remained practically unknown to Estonian educators for many decades. When Taba became known worldwide, the infiltration of her ideas to Estonia was hampered by the Soviet regime (lasting from 1940 to 1991), which was hostile to any Western educational ideas. As reparation for the injustice that Hilda Taba experienced in her lifetime, two international curriculum conferences in honour of her 90th and 100th anniversaries were held at the University of Tartu in 1992 and 2002.

On the international stage, Hilda Taba has merited a prestigious position among other outstanding educators of the twentieth century. Her scientific heritage in the field of educational philosophy, intergroup education and curriculum development is considerable, and it provided the edifice of educational knowledge with many important building blocks of lasting value. Many of Taba's ideas on curriculum design, like the organization of content, her classification of educational objectives, and inductive strategies of concept formation and teaching, have become classics of pedagogy. Her inductive approach to teaching has been introduced as a prototype in six consecutive editions of *Models of teaching* (Joyce, Weil & Calhoun, 2000).

Hilda Taba's personality and miraculous academic career in the United States have convincingly proven what the synergy of an adventurous soul, talent, a strong desire to achieve, perseverance and industry can produce when combined together in a single person.

Notes

- * Edgar Krull (Estonia). Professor of Education and the Head of the Department of General Education at the University of Tartu. Ph.D. in education (1987). Main courses taught are educational psychology, curriculum studies and assessment of teaching skills. Major field of research is teachers' professional development. E-mail: ekrull@ut.ee
1. This was caused by a strong intellectual and political influence of German nobleman landowners who settled in Estonia from the thirteenth century onwards. In spite of the incorporation of Estonia into the Russian Empire at the beginning of eighteenth century, the strong dominance of the German nobility in public life lasted until the beginning of the First World War and only started to weaken after the declaration of Estonian independence in 1918.
 2. The Dalton Plan is an education system in which students accept as individualized contracts the work assigned to them. These contracts are actually monthly assignments. Students work at their own rates and do not depend on close guidance from their teachers, although they confer individually with the teachers. The plan is named for the Dalton, Massachusetts, high school where Helen Parkhurst devised and, from 1913, perfected it (Dalton Plan, 1993).
 3. Eight-year study was a large-scale investigation in the United States that was intended to compare the educational effectiveness of the thirty high schools whose works were based on the principles of progressive education propagated by John Dewey and William Kilpatrick, compared to the educational outcomes obtained by the schools using conventional programmes and methods (see Lindgren, 1972, p. 310–11).

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