

“Negotiative” Teaching of Philosophy

Nathalie Robisco^{1*}

1. Philosophy Teacher, High School of Paul Vincensini, Bastia, France.

* Corresponding Author’s Email: nathalie.robisco@gmail.com

Abstract – In this article, I analyze my current practice as a philosophy teacher. When I began to teach, classes were filled of twenty-four students, a maximum, and teaching was a real dialogue. On the contrary, nowadays, thirty-five is a norm, and often my colleagues are obliged to fulfill the syllabus, without knowing if it is understood. For me, philosophy is always a discussion, or it loses its sense; in consequence, I chose to teach to individuals, by mail or in a coffee-shop. We figure a rendezvous. Against the massive and imposed learning, as a researcher, I share knowledge, which is different.

I. INTRODUCTION

Practicing a “negotiative” teaching, where dialogue has a fundamental place, is in agreement with some contributions I made upon the management of Hughes Lethierry, a former professor at the ENS of Lyon, France, now director of publications about education or philosophy; the latest being *Mûrir de Rire*, an analysis of the role of humor in pedagogy. With means such as theater, humor, literature, music, even the “worst” discipline (I write “worst” because philosophy is always supposed to be boring) can be accessible and, sometimes, funny. But it depends entirely on the individuals implicated in the process. I have always tried to make it so in the cases under investigation in these pages: in one word, *personalized learning*.

Much has been written about personalized learning, first by Freinet, and now by specialists such as Meirieu; Freinet being the founder of this movement, we’ll cite it by preference:

Disons – en attendant les explications techniques qui suivront – que la vraie discipline ne s’institue pas du dehors, selon une règle préétablie, avec son cortège d’interdits et de sanctions. Elle a la conséquence naturelle d’une bonne organisation du travail coopératif et du climat moral de la classe. L’expérience nous a montré que lorsque la classe est bien structurée, quand les enfants ont tous, individuellement ou en groupe, un travail intéressant qui s’inscrit dans le cadre de la vie de la classe, nous parvenons à l’harmonie presque idéale. Il n’y a de désordre que lorsqu’il y a faille dans l’organisation du travail, lorsque l’enfant n’est pas accroché par une activité qui répond à ses désirs et ses possibilités. C’est un des avantages majeurs de nos techniques de régler définitivement le problème de la discipline scolaire, en créant un milieu éminemment éducatif et humain (Freinet, Célestin, 1977).

It is now a hot topic, but is out in the facts in France. What could the reason(s) be? Charged classrooms, due to a disengagement of State in education; no recruitment, low salaries, teachers who think to quit for retirement, are the essential causes. So, when I began

to teach, personalized learning was a must, and now it is impossible. All the writings I have found about this issue were written in the 1970s or in the 1980s, as we can read below:

La pédagogie différenciée exige de l'enseignant une capacité relationnelle plus authentique et affinée que pour le cours magistral, car il est centré sur la personne à guider dans le premier cas, sur le savoir dans le second. (In personalized learning, the teacher must be able of a relation more authentic and accurate than in a magisterial lesson, for he must focus in the first case on the person to guide. In the second one, he must focus in the knowledge. Artaud, 1986).

II. PERSONALIZED LEARNING IN PHILOSOPHY

In a matter such as philosophy, in less than a trimester, students are convinced that they will never understand, and that it is useless for the economical context of today. The necessity to think this economy and policy is not shown, it does not appear. The syllabus is complex, and in science classes, notions as conscience, if not explained with contemporary examples, seem too difficult and without utility; I mean utility by a tool in searching a job, in management, and so on. In the book bought by the high school to study the syllabus, authors required for notions such as “conscience”, or “freedom” seem old-fashioned to the students. Plato, of course, will be used for self-conscience. Bergson, or Aristotle, will show the moral one. It will be to Rousseau or Marx to put in evidence the political conscience. After the lesson, in every matter, students are taught the technique of the dissertation, and they have to write one, on a subject relevant to what was studied. This one is generally taken in an issue relative to actuality, to show that even an old philosopher is useful to think the modern life. But I learned by students that it was no more the case, and that they were supposed to have understood, by having attended and heard the lesson. In philosophy, the difference between attending a class and understanding it is fundamental: it supposes the participation and the implication of the student. Both (participation and implication) are no more possible in over filled classrooms. The consequence is lack of motivation for the teacher, and lack of work for the teenager. In a world where shared knowledge is evidence, with the internet, it is more attractive to play with a tablet, or even to go to the beach when there is sun, than stay in class and listen without interest. My place is here: I share with the student my research and competency.

First, as they will not go to the theater by themselves, preferring videos on YouTube, or BD, I chose to represent one in my town: not the more known, the official, but what we call “art and essay”; most of the shows can be used in matters like French, English, philosophy, history, or others; it depends on the subject. In this company, there is a school of theater for teenagers, and sometimes the dramas are played by them: in this case, it is very attractive to go, because you can see your friend on the stage. Recently, an English troupe went to play a new version, (but with a French version in subtitles), of Shakespeare's Othello; of course, this adaptation should have been of great interest for teachers of English; but I noticed they were not engaged in bringing a group of teenagers to a play; it has to be said that they would be obliged to fill papers and authorizations, an administrative way so boring that it uses the best motivation. However, teens were present at this show, and they enjoyed it.

They are mature enough to go alone, if they get the information. I communicate it by putting in evidence the flyers at the cafeteria of the high school, where everyone goes in the day. Moreover, I email my colleagues so that they are informed, too. Some extracts of these shows and the pedagogical use of it can be consulted in the volume about humor in philosophy (*Mûrir de Rire*, in press).

About email, let me say I gave it to some students, also; not all, it would be an invasion in my personal life; but when someone tells me he (or she) wants seriously to work, because he needs advice, I act like this; even if it seems crazy for many, I consider it a part of my job. As a consequence, late in the evening, sometimes at almost ten p.m., I receive a mail asking for help, and I can see in its content what was misunderstood in the lesson. Really, most of times, it is the lesson by itself which is not understood, because the teacher gave as subject “find out a topic of dissertation on ... (this notion) and works in literature or art to illustrate it”. This sentence represents the very precise definition of the dissertation in philosophy. If the student understands this technique at the beginning of the year, when normally the role and definition of philosophy are explained, everything is done for the other notions. In fact, it is to the student to discover by himself what philosophy is. The implications of a question like this one are to use what was studied in the whole teaching at the high school, to put them under investigation: it is the reason why philosophy is taught the last year, because the whole culture is supposed to be acquired. But if not understood? In a situation like this one, the only path toward a real knowledge is a personalized learning, with a dialogue. In some cases, the student comes to work with me, and we build his own dissertation together: my intervention is limited to help, to show and explain the technique. After this, he is enabled to be successful; this is the real aim of the meeting; providing autonomy in thought, by showing what philosophy is really. But this is a privilege in the system of actual teaching. Moreover, I try to prove that a problem can be resolved in multiple ways.

In effect, many students think that if they fail in philosophy, it is because they differ, or don't have the same opinion as the teacher. This prejudice contributes to explain the difficulty and failures in this matter. The aim of the dissertation would be, not to think personally and with originality, but to put in evidence that the lesson is learned. Yes, learned, as mathematics, or physics, not understood.

The role of the individual is nothing in this conception. I demonstrate the contrary, using frequent examples taken in a common background, like music. But students are obliged, by my questions, to find out the first basis: my fundamental asking is always “What do you think?” Or “What is the problem for you?” If I don't act like this, in a “negotiative” way, they would have the idea that I impose them a solution, a way of thinking, as every teacher; and I don't want. I want them to think by themselves. My role is limited to show the path to this personal thought.

When I am emailed, it is generally because the subject imposed implies culture, and that it is not seen. I was on a topic about art, and on one about liberty. In these cases, it is evident that the teacher did not explain how to use the references in a dissertation, or the student did not understand how to use the culture he has acquired in his past years at the high

school; in fact, it is a mist of the two. The syllabus is, from years to years, lighter and lighter, and the lack of recruitment makes of the philosophy taught at school, not philosophy, but a fake thought. If continued, this policy will make of teenagers nuts, able to look at the TV, and to play with a computer. What would become the more brilliant teenagers?

In the name of equality, because education is under the control of State, we are giving birth to the more unequal system; the richest go in private schools, or pay themselves lessons after instruction, and the others are given a massive education, where the syllabus is very light in the first years and, then, complex in the last year, that of the A-level.

It cannot appear evident, but even by mail, an exchange is possible, to provide culture to the student. It is sometimes with works they have seen, not entirely, by lack of time, but by extract. I send them a link to download the opus, so that we can have a common source of reference. Many classical texts are no more under copyright, and can be read freely on the National Library (French equivalent of Library of Congress). Often, Canadian Universities offer the possibility to download the full text in all formats: so, we have a basis to work with. I am used to doing this, as a researcher, when I need a document, and don't find it at the library of my town. As I cannot buy all the books I read, I frequently go to these sites. This is an experience available for a student; most links are premade revisions, to learn the thought of a philosopher. As always, in the links of revisions found on the internet, the purpose is not to understand; it is to learn. I am never sure when the distinction is really made, and when we can use the past learning to think. All my efforts are in this direction. E-learning is not developed in France, except the National center of e-education (CNED, in French), and the on-line sites of universities are rare, unlike USA and Canada. MOOC are inexistent. But there is a need for students, especially the more brilliant ones.

III. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, I will say that these cases put in evidence the necessity of personalized learning and the failures of a system where education is always the last one in the budget. Overfilled classrooms and the same exigencies in competencies as if there were twenty four students, is a folly. Parents have this exigency, managers, too, when the young man or woman quit the high school to get hired. When they do not go on in a university, and directly search a job, it is evident that a critical mind, a capacity to reason, is useful. When they enter the university, the first year is most often a failure, because the student is not enabled to work alone. So, yes, philosophy is useful, if it is an exchange. Without this dimension, it loses its interest and its sense.

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Nathalie Robisco' Bio-data:

Nathalie ROBISCO is a philosophy teacher with 20 years of experience, in technical high schools. She has adopted personalized learning since the beginning of her career, because philosophy is supposed to be a dialogue. Since ten years ago, she has worked in various sectors of education, such as library; she supports cultural projects in the town, in favor of the students. Facing the disengagement of State in education, she chooses recently to share with students her competency as an independent researcher. Her main interests are: education, human rights, and popular protests, especially in MENA.

Last articles:

La philo, ce n'est pas ch... ça peut meme etre drôle (Philosophy is not a drag, it even could be funny), and:

Rire pour resister: Grand-Peur et Misère du Troisième Reich (Laughing as a protest: Fear and Misery of the Third Reich), in: *Mûrir de Rire*, (in press), Two volumes, France, Paris, EPU.

Author of “Rire pour Résister: Grand-Peur et Misère du Troisième Reich “, (“Laughing as a protest: Fear and Misery of the Third Reich”) in: *Mûrir de Rire* (in press), France, Paris, EPU.

Author of an article about children’s rights: <http://www.cultures-et-croyances.com/etude-le-droit-des-enfants-a-ujourdhui-une-violence-cache>

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