

# TEACHING AND CULTURE OR THE CURRENT DYNAMICS OF TRANSFER



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This article deals with a fundamental question on a topic that should be of interest to everyone in education or teaching today's youth: Culture. The first part of the article acknowledges the crisis in reason from epistemic, practical or ethical dimensions. In the second part, I will attempt to clarify what is presently at stake in the transfer of culture and what this means to one's teaching practice when it is viewed as a cultural practice.

## ▶ CULTURE IN ALL ITS FORMS

In traditional Western education, the question of culture is nothing new. The question was raised by the Greeks, who defined culture as logos, speech, spoken word, language and reason. The Greek definition of culture as humanism and rationalism was maintained until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was torn down by critics like Nietzsche, Marx and Freud before being finished off by two world wars, Auschwitz and the gulags. In his excellent book *La culture contre l'homme (Culture against man)* Georges Steiner (1973) writes that several fundamental concepts were destroyed with the advent of WW2, including the concept that humanism improves man and society. I believe that the incumbent responsibility we have today to define a meaningful concept of culture in education must start from this massive and brutal break in Western conscience, one we have inherited and must now assume, consider and orient.

This is precisely what several twentieth century authors tried to accomplish under the general theme of a cultural crisis. This cultural crisis is a crisis in

knowledge and values, a crisis of reason on epistemic and practical levels. I will examine each of these briefly.

The crisis of knowledge can be interpreted in several ways. According to Marcel Gauchet, French philosopher and sociologist, the crisis of reason is linked to a weakening of "*L'idéal des Lumières*", the ideal according to which knowledge has an emancipating social value. The decline in support for this ideal that we are witnessing today is mainly due to the fact that western society's dreams of emancipation, of removing the yoke of ignorance and of creating areas where freedom is protected by charters, have been realized to a large degree. We could discuss at length the position taken by Gauchet, but it deserves credit at least for drawing attention to the loss of prestige and appeal of knowledge in modern and postmodern societies. For others like Edgar Morin (1986), the crisis of reason is a crisis in the foundations of knowledge. According to Morin, the crisis in the philosophical foundations combined with the crisis in the scientific foundations of knowledge leads to an "ontological crisis of reality".

The crises in hard sciences and human sciences combine forces to mask knowledge with a lasting uncertainty. The crisis in knowledge can also be linked to the division and infinite multiplication of knowledge, increased tenfold by advances in digital technology, affecting not only the possibility of "knowing about knowledge" according to Edgar Morin, but also the possibility of knowing about ourselves and the world. Georges Gusdorf spoke of a "pathology of knowledge". Michel Serres (1991) was voicing a similar opinion when he remarked that contemporary culture is characterized by a divorce between science and culture, accentuated by the specialization of knowledge.

We are living in exciting times as regards the progress of knowledge, but we tend to forget that this exponential growth of knowledge and informational sources has a perverse effect also, such as the "mutilation of knowledge", i.e., a new form of "obscurantism", a new ignorance at the very heart of knowledge, a loss of general and global knowledge according to Edgar Morin. Closer to home, the author Fernand Dumont (1994) interprets the cultural crisis as a rupture between the various forms of secondary culture, the arts, knowledge, world views, and as a widening of the gap between birth culture (first culture) and secondary culture, between knowledge and life.

For its part, the crisis in practical reason can be defined in a few words as plurality, relativity and anti-authoritarian individualism. We've heard it all before: Individualism is the great accomplishment of the modern world; each individual is free to choose

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his own lifestyle and values. The subject is not open to discussion or debate. Each person has their own opinions and values, I respect you, you respect me and so life goes. My goal here is not to criticize this point of view that I share to a certain degree, but rather to explore it within a context marked by the pluralism of worldviews, reinforced by the emergence of new cultures, the transfer of popular culture, and more broadly speaking, public space and common living, components that are more radical in character than ever.

These quick considerations are not only theoretical; they also raise a number of questions and complex problems on various levels that have repercussions on role of educational institutions relative to cultural transfer, on the role and tasks of the cultured pedagogue. Let us look at a few examples. The often heated discussions on the legal concept of reasonable accommodation give us an idea of the magnitude of the challenges awaiting public schools with their common, democratic and pluralistic natures. We anticipate that any decision to integrate a combined course on ethics and religious culture in schools will result in heated debates between supporters of critical rational thinking and defenders of humanity's moral, spiritual and religious heritage. One day in the future, the course will also have to integrate the teaching of history. Recent discussions on citizenship education provide a good example of a program whose objectives are not clearly defined.

I also mention the clear-cut positions on current reform, polarized between supporters and those who reject reform; with one group focusing on competencies and the other, on knowledge. Moreover, in a context of relative destabilization of knowledge, all questions dealing with knowledge and programs of study remain open for debate. What place should be given to the mother tongue/language spoken at home? What about a second or third language? Should more time be allotted to science? What should be done about technology and the stunning development of new information technologies? What place should be given to art? What should be the role and place of culture vehiculated through the media? Should preference be given to a unified cultural transfer or one that is "an open and diversified canon" based on the diversity and autonomy of specific environments and institutions?

In addition, normative relativism raises issues that are no less pertinent or difficult. As George Leroux (2006) stated recently, it impacts the basic structure of our society and the master/student relationship. In short, we see that education and teaching, supported a long time by humanist and rationalist tradition, have entered a phase of relative uncertainty. What should be done? How should education and culture be defined? How can teaching become a cultural practice? How do we perceive the role and tasks of the cultured pedagogue? I would like to provide a few brief guidelines rather than answers.

## THE ROLE OF TODAY'S CULTURED TEACHER

To move forward on these questions, I believe we must avoid the pitfall of recriminations: school is acultural, teachers are uncultured, students learn nothing and are reading less and less. In my opinion, these statements are not only misleading but in the sense of incantations, define culture as sacred and transcendent by nature: Culture is "already born", it has "already been given to the world", and as Jean Houssaye (1993) puts it, leads to "thinking that is focused both "on the past and the future

that is already here". But the pitfalls of consumerism and the doctrine of technicism are no less dangerous. On the one hand, there is consumerism, where education becomes part of a generalized system of consumption, "a market for intelligence and knowledge" (Kerlan, 2003); on the other is technicism, where education becomes part of a generalized control system and teaching methodically results in the production of efficient human beings.

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Between the two, I found an approach in hermeneutic<sup>1</sup> philosophy, more specifically a theory put forth by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1996) and by Paul Ricoeur (1986) that allows us to conceptualize and wholly embrace the spirit of the day, the diversity of cultures, relativism and generalized perspectivism, without falling into an overall criticism of reason that would stop the search for comprehension, dialogue, meaning and shared truths, of "common reasons", wrote Fernand Dumont (1995).

I would like to make two comments on the subject of hermeneutics, without regard for scholastic discipline nor the progression of learning based on age and level of education.

<sup>1</sup> Hermeneutics has a long history originating with early Greek thinking. Traditionally, it designated the art, the technique or method of interpreting sacred, profane and eventually, legal texts. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Gadamer's work, it acquired the broader meaning of a philosophical theory on the human experience of meaning.



My goal in writing this article is not to rewrite a brief summary of the complex history of hermeneutics by positioning it in relation to other approaches. I will limit myself to identifying its most important contributions to culture in education by saying that the dialectic of objective culture vs. subjectivity, plays a key role. Based on this perspective, the emphasis is not on the cultural object per se, but rather the relationship the subject has with the cultural objects. In other words, the relationship between school education and culture must be developed through the relationships the subject has with the world, culture and others, as with himself. We are therefore led to take greater account of the diversity of educational and cultural contexts and especially, the active participation of the learning subject knowing that he learns better and in a more meaningful and lasting way when he contributes to the construction of meaning.

In a world characterized by an epistemic and normative crisis, as generally described in the first section, when a crisis in the cultural transfer by schools is taking root, hermeneutics leads us to consider that the role of the school and teachers is to restore continuity between knowledge and life, between different types of knowledge, between humans, and between the past and the present.

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Building links between knowledge and life means re-conquering meaning and relevance by linking them to questions that humans have always asked and continue to ask about themselves, others and the world. Re-establishing links between fragmented bits of knowledge

means finding a common global meaning, building links, creating ties between the diverse fields of human activity and helping students integrate them. Re-establishing continuity among humans implies demanding that each student participate in the dialogue, which is the only way to form a common milieu, a space where they can co-exist despite their differences. Re-establishing links between the past and the present means helping students become aware of the historical depth of what is being transmitted to them. It enables them to be supportive of the men and women who came before them, of history that has been entrusted to them and history that they will make by becoming part of it. As we can see, when it comes to restoring continuity over the inherent ruptures in modern and postmodern societies, the stakes involved in the transfer are not only epistemic and hermeneutic but also ethical and political.

The role of today's education specialist is much like that of an clever, inventive and creative handyman who is responsible for constructing meaning and for teaching this in turn, to every student; that of building meaning, of being aware and of being lucid. This responsibility demands the implementation of cultural pedagogy with a fourfold meaning: Education as it relates to relevance, integration, dialogue and memory. To my mind, hermeneutics allows us to come to terms with the present world, but allows us to avoid the pitfall of a nostalgic return to a lost sense of unity and the danger of abandoning the educational blueprint to consumerism and technicism. ●

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