Formative meaningfulness and democratic participation. A survey on the teaching of history and literature

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Abstract

The research presented here aims to be part of debate of the importance of the humanities and to offer its contribution from an educational point of view. The matter in question is the teaching of the humanities, in particular history and literature though dealt with in an unusual and exploratory way, albeit with a clear purpose: listening to students to find out how and to what extent their voice and intimate involvement in the topic of the study can contribute to a greater understanding of the teaching-learning process and to an improvement in terms of effectiveness of teaching practices, in reference specifically to the two humanistic subjects under scrutiny.

Keywords*: history; literature; students; Grounded Theory.*

1. Introduction

Spring of 2010 marked the publication of Martha Nussbaum's successful book, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, in which the American scholar accused *apertis verbis* the escalation of a "silent" crisis of unprecedented proportions and global scope: "the world crisis in education" (Nussbaum, 2010: 21). In her view, in almost every part of the world, humanistic and artistic studies have been undergoing a powerful and progressive downsizing, in primary, secondary and university education, to the benefit of forms of knowledge, politically encouraged and financed, which show an immediate impact on profit and economic growth. All this has determined not only an evident cultural decline of contemporary society as a whole, but also a lack of democracy, since the withdrawal of humanistic knowledge has brought with it a reduction in the ability for critical thought as well as independent judgment, freedom of thought and the power of imagination, and therefore the very ability to embrace the world and its multiple challenges with an open and inclusive gaze.

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Nussbaum's book restored vigour to a debate that was certainly not new – that of the importance of the humanities, their virtues and potential to educate, not only on a personal level, but also on a social and political one, and it became a reference point for those all over the world who felt this to be a decisive battle for the future (*Ibid*.: 157). Its rapid international success led to books, speeches, discussions and even appeals from all over the world that, using the American philosopher's reasoning, have contributed in recent years to a debate that deals with a clearly sensitive topic, potentially full of consequences.

The research presented here aims to be part of this debate and to offer its contribution from an educational point of view.[1] The matter in question is the teaching of the humanities, in particular history and literature though dealt with in an unusual and exploratory way, albeit with a clear purpose: listening to students to find out how and to what extent their voice and intimate involvement in the topic of the study can contribute to a greater understanding of the teaching-learning process and to an improvement in terms of effectiveness of teaching practices, in reference specifically to the two humanistic subjects under scrutiny.

2. The theory

The study's theory is based on the most recent developments in educational research, which —as we know— in around the Eighties underwent a radical change of objective: no longer proposing models *for* teaching so much as models *of* teaching; in other words, the idea was no longer "to offer standard models that tell the teacher how to teach, but to develop others that are effective at throwing light on the ways in which teaching is carried out" (Laneve, 2017: 344).

The traditional model *for* teaching, with a decidedly rule-driven, prescriptive character, becomes progressively flanked by a model *of* teaching, of an observational, descriptive, analytical and interpretive nature, based on an epistemic review of the concept of pathy (Dewey, 1929; Schön, 1983; Polanyi, 1966): a model of 'practice' —as has been observed (Damiano, 1998)— that considers practice no longer secondary or subordinate to theory, but as a privileged viewpoint from which to better understand the articulation of teaching-learning processes. From this perspective, only a more seriously observational, deconstructive and interpretative education-

1 This essay takes up and develops the outcomes of an exploratory investigation initiated by the author in 2018, already published in English and Portuguese —respectively under the titles of *Formative meaningfulness and democratic participation: a survey on the teaching of history and literature* and *Significado formativo e participação democrática: uma pesquisa sobre o ensino da história e da literatura*— in the *Revista online de Politica e Gestão Educacional*, 23, no. 1, Jan.-Abr. 2019. The present essay continues the investigation, strengthens it on a quantitative level, refines the interpretation of the outcomes that emerged and seeks to indicate subsequent developments.

al approach to the practical contexts of teaching —according to numerous scholars on the basis of serious in-depth study (Altet, 2003, 2006; Blanchard-Laville & Fablet, 2000; Bru, 2002; Day & Laneve, 2011; Laneve, 2005, 2010)— seems nowadays able to lead to a better and more thorough understanding of teaching-learning.

An analytical-descriptive approach to teaching requires scientific consideration of all its parts: in particular, the *student*, considered as one who plays an active, relevant role in its realization and results, today deserves more thorough and rigorous attention, since they are not only a valuable resource that aids understanding of teaching as an activity (Gemma, 2011, 2012, 2013; Gemma & Cafagna, 2019, 2020), but perhaps – as the increasingly numerous exponents of the *student voice* perspective support – even as a potential tool for transforming school (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001, 2012; Smyth, 2006; Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013; Gemma & Grion, 2015).

Further input, besides what derives from the recent research conducted from the *student voice* viewpoint, has arisen from a number of continental works dating back to the 1990s (Perrenoud, 1994; Coulon, 1997) that starting from the student and focusing the attention on the *meaning* of school work, has helped to further refine the theoretical background of the study.

3. Method

In view of the aim and the explorative nature we decided to give our study, we adopted the Grounded Theory method (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Tarozzi, 2008).

We translated the area of focus —the teaching of humanistic knowledge as seen through the students' gaze and voice— into the following research question: *which factors and processes in the teacher-student relationship influence the development of a representation of history and literature?*

As is usual with the GT method, we adopted the *semi-structured interview* approach, taking into account not only the specificity of the research but also the particular characteristics this tool acquires within a GT (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Kvale, 1996): less therefore a tool for collecting facts and more a device able to generate interpretations of personal experiences aimed at explaining how participants give meaning to their own experiences.

Overall, the survey involved 75 students, mostly female (57), aged between 19 and 25. However, 85 interviews were carried out, since some interviewees were interviewed twice, in order obtain more thorough results. There were four data collections and two versions of the interview.

Participants included students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Primary Education, Department of Education Sciences, Psychology and Communication at the Aldo Moro University of Bari, and the Master's Degree Course in Pedagogy and Continuing Education, organized by the Faculty of Educa-

tion Sciences at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples. A common feature among all the participants was the expressly declared intention to become a teacher on completion of their degree. Aspects that differentiated participants were age, gender and, albeit in reduced form, geographical belonging. All participants were attending universities in Southern Italy.

4. Results

4.1. *First and second data collection*

The first version of the interview was used in two successive phases: initially —first data collection— it was administered to 20 female students attending the master's degree Course in Primary Education at the Aldo Moro University of Bari; subsequently —second data collection—, its aim was to verify whether the results that emerged from the first collection underwent substantial changes following a first diversification of the characteristics of the participants and the contexts. This involved 15 students, of which 9 females and 6 males, aged between 22 and 25, all attending the Master's Degree in Pedagogy and continuing education at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples.[2]

Below is the first version of the interview, in which we naturally preferred to include open questions, able to solicit sufficiently broad answers.

1. What do the terms 'history' and 'literature' mean to you?
2. What is your relationship with history and literature?
3. What do you think about school's approach to these two disciplines?
4. In your view, does your degree course teach history and literature satisfactorily?
5. In your view, could school and university teach history and literature more effectively? How?

Table 1: First version of the interview

The First question highlighted two different ways of understanding the meaning of the two terms: the first 'scholastic', almost bureaucratic, from which students generally tended to distance themselves; the second 'per-

2 This second data collection did not reveal any significant variations with respect to the results of the first. It ended up therefore by substantially confirming the results, although consolidating them in terms of quantity. The study, still in progress, intends however to continue in the direction of a more marked differentiation both of the characteristics of the participants and the contexts: for example interviewing, after the future teachers, students who have opted for strictly humanistic degree courses and/or strictly scientific ones, or by involving universities in Central and Northern Italy, perhaps even going on to internationalize the research by involving foreign universities as well.

sonal', which they welcomed and felt to be more positive. Two directions emerged: on one hand, an invitation to investigate further the characteristics of teaching history and literature at school to clarify the reasons for this —albeit partial and barely mentioned— distancing from the image of history and literature transmitted by the way these subjects are taught at school; on the other, an invitation to investigate better the relationship that the need for personalization of the two terms might possibly have with school and university teaching (Figures 1a and 1b).

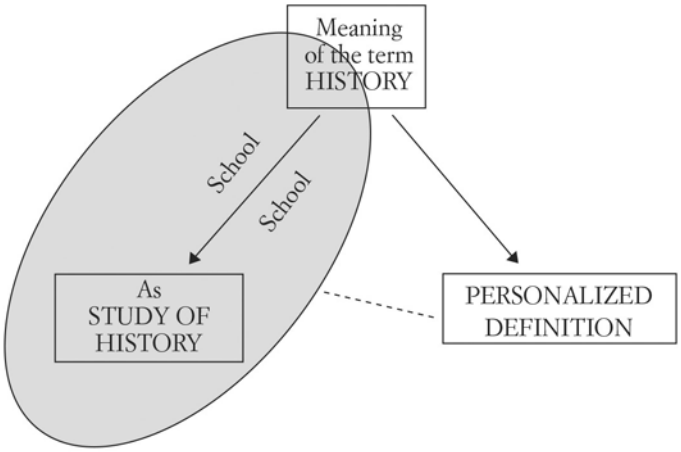


Fig. 1a: Meaning of the term 'history'

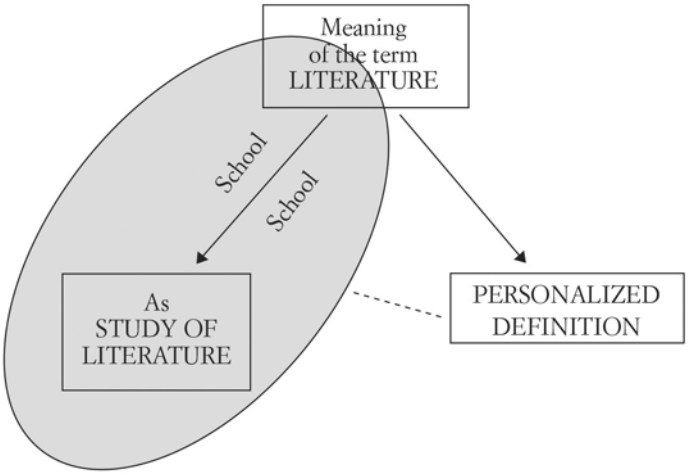


Fig. 1b: Meaning of the term 'literature'

The *Second question* was directly connected to the second direction of research that emerged from the codification of the answers to the first question. Indeed, it was in a sense, preliminary to it and was intended to clarify the personal meaning the participants attributed to the two subjects. The categories that emerged from the coding process were as follows: *Freedom/Spontaneity*, *Emotional tone*, *Relevance to one's own life*, *Curiosity*, *Passion*, *Participation*, *Predisposition to reflection*, *reasoning and problematization*, *Surge of vitality*, *Critical and aware democratic participation*. These categories, with their relative features, guide and connote experiences of spontaneous studying of a topic of history or the reading of a novel or book of poetry. Tying up with one another profitably and designing a network of relationships that are extremely positive and intense, they represent the factors involved in developing a personal representation of history and literature (Figure 2).

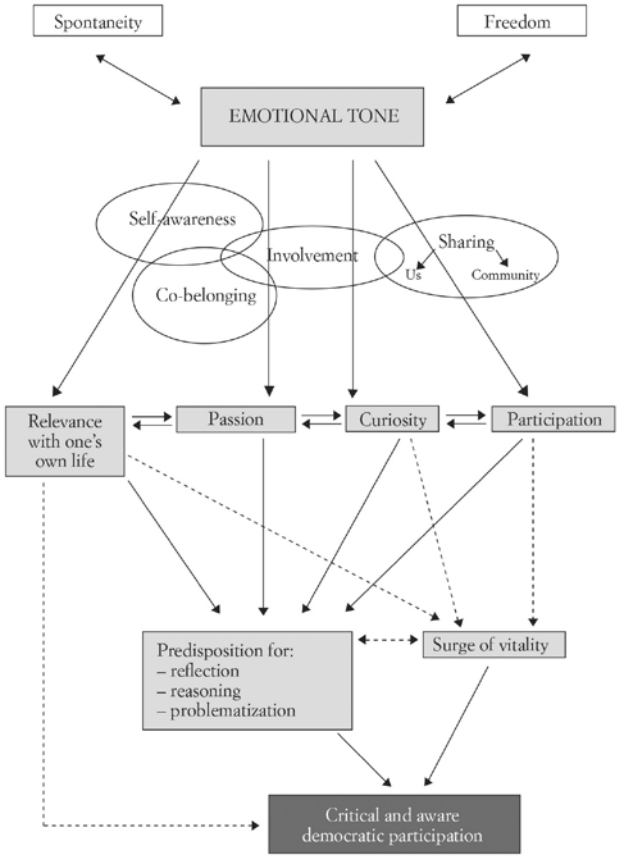


Fig. 2: Factors involved in developing a personal representation of history and literature

The *Third and Fourth questions* addressed the first of the two points that emerged from the codification of the answers to the first question, that is the prompt to look more deeply into the way history and literature are taught at school in order to try to understand the moderate but existing disaffection of the interviewees. The students' answers made a conscious distinction between the general approach of schools and universities to the knowledge of the two subjects and the way they are taught. With respect to the first point, two categories emerged: *Logic of control* and *Treatment of the subjects*; the second revealed four categories: *Extrinsic reasons*, *Inhibited communication*, *Importance of memory* and *Meaningfulness either poor or completely absent*. In short the teaching of history and literature at school and university was considered to be unsatisfactory overall due to a series of interrelated factors, some of which can be traced back to a general approach by the two institutions, such as *Logic of control* and *Treatment of the subjects*, others, connected to the first but more relevant to the actual teaching of the two subjects, included *Extrinsic reasons*, *Inhibited communication*, *Centrality of memory* and *Meaningfulness either poor or completely absent*. These categories and their properties represent the factors involved in developing a representation of history and literature at school and university (Figure 3).

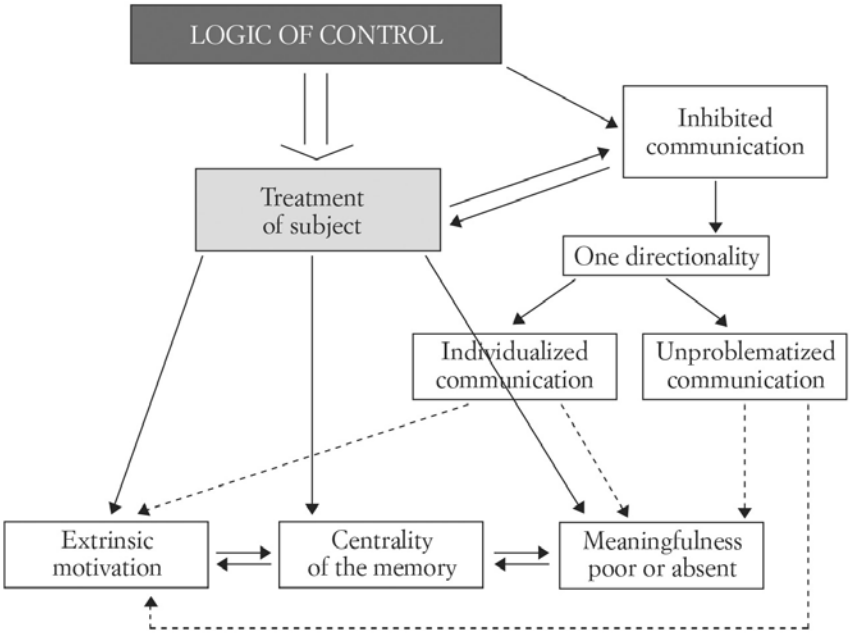


Fig. 3: Factors involved in developing a representation of history and literature at school and university

The purpose of the *Fifth question*, divided into two parts, was to tackle the *pars construens* of the topic with the students themselves, asking them if and how school and university could teach history and literature in a different and more effective way. The first part of the question was particularly significant as it enabled the students to express their full trust in both institutions and the key role they give to the teaching of the two subjects, not only in terms of personal and human development, but also on a political and social level; the second, on the other hand, proved 'disappointing' in the sense that it did not elicit significant answers, probably because it was too open.

In view of this, we decided to remodel the second part of the last question and carry out another, very short interview with a new group of participants.

4.2. *Third and fourth data collection*

Also the second version of the interview was used in two successive phases: initially —the third data collection— administered to 20 participants: 8 males and 12 females; 4 of the 8 males and 6 of the 12 females had already been involved in the first or second data collection and therefore were being re-interviewed; 16 participants were attending the Master's Degree Course in Pedagogy and Continuing Education at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, and 4, all female, were attending the Degree Course in Primary Education at the Aldo Moro University of Bari; subsequently —the fourth data collection—, with the aim of also quantitatively strengthening the results of the survey, involved another 30 participants, of which 22 females and 8 males, all attending the master's degree in Pedagogy and continuing education at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples.[3] For both the third and the fourth data collection, it was therefore decided to involve students who were a few years older, aged 23 to 25, and, at the same time —particularly with reference to the third collection— to include once again the female students who in the first data collection had seemed most motivated with regard to the subject of the survey.

Below is the second version of the interview, composed of only two questions. The aim here was to investigate more thoroughly the meaning of what emerged from the analysis of the answers to the first interview by inviting the interlocutor to imagine themselves in an ideal situation with respect to the topic dealt with, thus enriching and specifying the framework of the information received.

3 Unlike the first three, which followed on from one another between June 2018 to spring 2019, this fourth data collection took place between autumn 2021 and early 2022, owing to the suspension imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. To highlight the continuity, it was decided to keep the survey at the University "Suor Orsola Benincasa" of Naples, the same university where it had stopped, and on the same master's degree course, Pedagogy and Continuing Education, which has since changed to Pedagogical Counselling.

1. What form should communication take to make teaching history and literature more effective?
2. In what way can the degree of meaningfulness be increased in the teaching of history and literature?

Table 2: Second version of the interview

The *First question* concerned communication in the classroom, an area in which a varying range of critical issues emerged from analysis of the answers to the first interview. The numerous codifications obtained were grouped into the following two categories: *Open communication* and *Metacommunication*. The first expressed the much felt need to 'liberalize' communication at school, making it less 'institutional', more 'immediate' and, above all, less 'judged' in terms of form, and more attentive to the substance of the topics. It included characteristics that students would like to see in classroom teaching which, in their opinion, should be *circular*, *constructive*, *intersubjective*, *interdisciplinary* and *free*, characteristics that, unsurprisingly, fit in particularly well with the teaching of history and literature as they reflect certain fundamental words, such as *dialogue*, *person*, *freedom*. The second one, on the other hand, collected all the codifications recalling the strongly felt need for schools and universities to adopt a metacommunication that reflects on all that we are called to do and learn in the classroom; or, in other words, that both institutions, therefore, should give more time, legitimacy and even methodological rigour to make what is done and what is learned more meaningful.

The *Second Question* concerned the level of meaningfulness in the teaching of history and literature, which emerged as poor or, even, to quote one student, 'zero', from analysis of the answers to the third and the fourth question of the first interview. The codifications obtained were grouped into the following two categories: *Metacommunication on the meaning of the subjects* and the *Centrality of the educational relationship*. In short: for students, increasing the level of meaning in teaching history and literature means encouraging metacommunication about the meaning of the two subjects and creating a deeper educational two-way relationship through a broader, more inclusive approach: *cooperative* and *grounded* and which *arouses the interest of students* and sees them as *rounded individuals*.

Summarizing, therefore, from analysis of the answers to this second version of the interview, three fundamental factors emerged which were grouped into categories. By acting on these categories it is possible to try to make the teaching of history and literature more effective: *Open communication, Metacommunication on the meaning of the subjects* and *Centrality of the educational relationship*. These three interrelated factors highlight properties that accentuate this interrelationship and suggest meaningful ways of teaching (Figure 4).

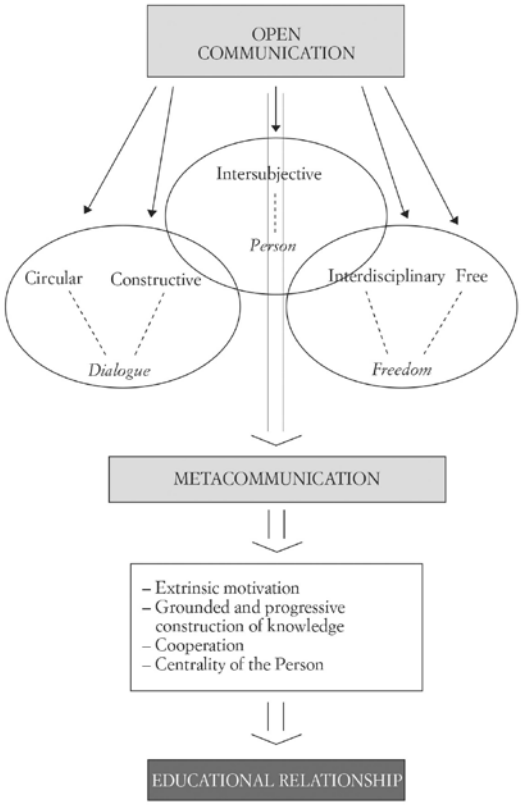


Fig. 4: Elements required for a more effective way of teaching history and literature

5. Core category and 'emerging theory'

Identification of the core category was made on a purely conceptual level, leaving ample space for theoretical sensitivity and intuition. We sought to find the key unifying and organizing concept of the categories as a whole, using inductive reasoning to order them in degrees of importance.

Two directions were established: the first revolving around the factors involved in the representation of history and literature induced by school and university teaching (see Figure 3); the second around the factors required for a more effective teaching of the two subjects (see Figure 4). Both directions were then considered, with constant reference to what emerged from closer examination of the personal representations of history and literature (see Figure 2). A remarkably positive attitude was found regarding these representations as well as a desire for a profitable and positive dialogue between both types of institution and after-school activity organizations as well.

The core category, that is the fundamental category that integrates and unifies the main categories that emerged from the analysis, and which therefore summarizes the key concept that explains from a psychological and behavioural point of view the action of a person in a certain context and with reference to a certain topic, was identified as *Meaningfulness*. Meaningfulness —to return to the research question— is therefore the concept that integrates and unites the factors influencing the students' maturation of the way history and literature are represented, and it guides the processes established between teacher and student. *Open communication*, *Metacommunication on the meaning of the subjects*, *Curiosity*, *Passion*, *Participation*, *Predisposition for reflection, reasoning and problematization*, *Surge of vitality*, with all their properties or sub-categories, in particular the *Centrality of the person* which contains within itself the need for a deeper *Educational relationship*, can be summed up in the concept of *Meaningfulness*.

Finally, development of the core category, gained using inductive reasoning, made it possible to trace and circumscribe the emerging theory (Figure 5).

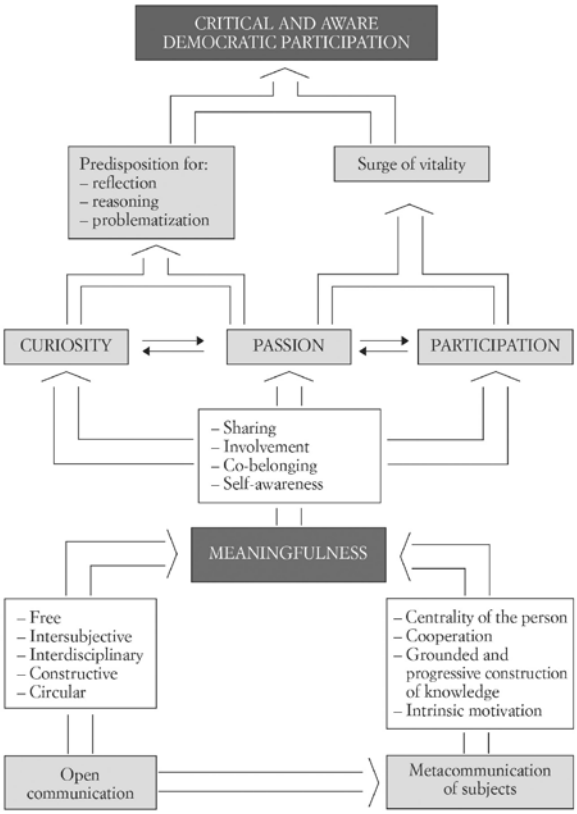


Fig. 5: Graphic representation of the emerging theory

6. Conclusion

A teaching of history and literature aimed at improving their meaningfulness introduces new factors capable of influencing the representation of the two subjects in terms of greater positivity and intensity, making it much closer to the personal representation shown by the students. If, on the one hand, it remains to be better understood how the teaching of the two subjects can tangibly follow the general lines suggested by the interviewees (thereby intensifying the meaningfulness that in a personal relationship with the two subjects is perceived by the students as spontaneous emotional tone), on the other hand it is reasonable to think that the effects produced by these three new factors in particular —curiosity, passion and participation— can also be generated at school and university if *formative meaningfulness in teaching* is acquired. And it is the production of these effects that restores to the teaching of history and literature, and thus to school and university, the centrality and indispensability students so patently recognize as belonging to both institutions.

The first of these effects is what we have called a *predisposition to reflection, reasoning and problematization*: a teaching of history and literature that intensifies its level of meaningfulness, intriguing, animating and involving students, generates a propensity for reflection, reasoning and problematization; in other words, it encourages them to ask questions, to get to the bottom of issues, to try to understand these matters better, from new and different points of view, and then prepares the way for discussion, compromise, if necessary, and real dialogue, teaching them to listen and argue correctly and persuasively; an effect that creates a self-perpetuating virtuous circle in the sense that it inspires a deeper knowledge of the two subjects.

The second effect, noted in particular with reference to history, is what we have defined with the expression *surge of vitality*: a teaching of history and literature that intensifies its level of meaningfulness, intriguing, animating and involving students, generates a surge of vitality and a desire to offer their own contribution, to participate actively in the flow of historical events, to intervene and become an active part of the history, and to participate in current issues without perceiving themselves as passive spectators whose opinion does not count.

Both effects —as we said—, if pursued and obtained, would restore to the teaching of the two subjects, and therefore to school and university, the centrality and indispensability that the students are keen to attribute to both institutions, not only in terms of the personal growth of each student, but also on the social and political level: to teach people not only to be qualified in their respective professions but also able to represent the values of justice, equality and solidarity, respect for others, for the rules of coexistence, for the environment they live in, able, in other words, to aspire to a healthier and more liveable society and to offer their own contribution. It is evident that this basic objective future teachers recognize as a funda-

mental vocation of school and university has to do with the *education to enjoy and have a sense of participation in the life of a democratic society* and how, for this purpose, the two effects mentioned above are essential factors: indeed, if the second, in terms of the desire to get involved, is the precondition for genuine democratic participation, the first, or rather, the willingness to understand better, to discern and to accept views that are different from one's own, is the best way of doing so in a critical and conscious way.

This significant outcome, therefore, makes it possible to link the teaching of history and literature to democratic participation *through meaningfulness*, thus reaffirming the essential role that schools and universities are called to play in defence of democratic societies.

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