CODRUȚA HAINIC

INSTRUCTION IN HUMANITIES *VS.* FORMAL EDUCATION: DISENTANGLING THE PARADOX

Codruța Hainic
Babeş Bolyai University, Faculty of History and Philosophy, Department of Philosophy, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Email: codrutap4@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper shows that instruction in humanities requires special tackling with, as it revolves around the inculcation of a critical attitude towards the conceptual and methodical resources that scholars in humanities make use of. Consequently, what constitutes the "unfolding" of the humanities (and, more specifically, philosophy) is that they constantly turn towards their very conceptual and methodological foundations, in a perpetual attempt to rethink and renew them. Foundational change in the humanities is therefore higher in frequency than it is in formal sciences, which consequently renders the latter more adequate for what the educational systems in all modern societies call "formal education." Still, is there any hope left for instruction in humanities within formal education? The following paper accounts for a few attempts to answer this question positively. We focus mainly on post-secondary and graduate education, from which we draw the core research and examples presented in the paper.

Keywords: humanities instruction, human vs. natural sciences, post-secondary education, humanities crisis.

INSTRUIREA ÎN UMANIOARE *VS.* EDUCAȚIA FORMALĂ: DESCÂLCIREA PARADOXULUI

Rezumat: Lucrarea demonstrează că instruirea în domeniul umanioarelor cere un tip special de abordare, deoarece gravitează în jurul insuflării unei atitudini critice față de

resursele conceptuale şi metodologice la care fac apel cercetătorii din domeniul ştiinţelor umaniste. Aşadar, ceea ce constituie "demersul" umanioarelor (şi al filosofiei, mai precis) este faptul că se reîntorc mereu asupra propriilor fundamente conceptuale şi metodologice, într-un efort continuu de regândire şi reînnoire a acestora. Schimbarea fundamentelor în ştiinţele umaniste este aşadar mai frecventă decât în cazul ştiinţelor formale, ceea ce face, prin urmare, ca ultimele să fie mai adecvate pentru ceea ce sistemele educaţionale din societăţile moderne numesc "educaţie formală." Totuşi, mai există vreo speranţă pentru instruirea în ştiinţele umaniste în cadrul educaţiei formale? Lucrarea de faţă propune câteva încercări de răspuns pozitiv la această întrebare. Ne concentrăm în special pe educaţia liceală şi pe cea universitară, de unde preluăm nucleul cercetării şi exemplele prezentate în lucrare.

Cuvinte-cheie: instruirea în ştiinţele umaniste, ştiinţe umaniste vs. ştiinţe ale naturii, educaţie liceală, criza umanioarelor

1. Introduction: The Paradox and Its Roots

Broadly speaking, we call "formal" education whatever our society deems worthy of being formalized by means of curricula and studied systematically in schools and universities. One would, then, easily accept that what is worthy of inculcation is some kind of "educational ideal" that clusters the values and meanings of a civilization. The paradox, however, appears when the values and meanings of a civilization are ambivalent, plural, or even unintelligible to the extent to which their formal inculcation implies reviewing the sheer normativity and legitimacy of formal education itself.

To further investigate the paradox, I will turn to its roots dating from the second half of the 20th century. These are best summed up by Allan Bloom, in his Closing of the American Mind. As with the current economic crisis, is seems that what stemmed from the USA as a "crisis in humanities" also spread across the Atlantic and bedeviled the rest of the European Western World. To cut a long story short, the 1960s seem to be the "turning point" towards the crisis in the humanities, mainly because the consecutive influx of minorities and the general increase of student enrollment in the US. The most rigorous disciplines and specializations, namely, formal and natural sciences, had the most clear and high standards and "operational measures of competences." All disadvantaged and poor in skills "new people" were, then, directed towards the lower-in-standards social sciences. But if there was one place to perfectly fit the ill-prepared for education, then that place was the humanities, where standards were even less articulated and evident. Allan Bloom depicts this "decomposition of the universities" as follows: "The humanities and social sciences were debauched and grade inflation took off, while the natural sciences remain largely the preserve of white males. Thus the true elitists of the university have been able to stay on the good side of the forces of history without having to suffer any of the consequences. To find hysterical supporters of the revolution one had, not surprisingly, to go to the humanities. Passion and commitment, as

opposed to coolness, reason and objectivity, found their home there". (Bloom 1987, 351)

But with great diversity came a radical conflict of value systems. What once were stable structures of value and knowledge now paved the way to questioning the coherence of standardized social order, including standard formal instruction. This has led Karl Mannheim to characterize the educational system in the US as some sort of "shared center" from which decision and action emanate (Mannheim 1971, 57-60).

There is, however, a more philosophical (or, if you will, a linguistic-philosophical) reason for the current crisis of humanities. This lies in the concept of "humanities" per se, which, at a first glance, seems to be quite clear-cut. There is, first of all, "endless wrangling about what it does mean as the landscape of valuation continues to develop irregularities and displays incompatible growth." (Stunkel 1989, 329) Secondly, colleges and universities cannot pinpoint a "center of gravity" for the humanities, in the manner in which basic algebra is the "center" for complex explanations in physics, chemistry, and so forth. This sort of "cognitive dissonance" stems from the impossibility of deciding what should be accepted or rejected as the study object for humanities. If the ideal purpose of humanities was shared knowledge and an increase of the phenomenon of cultural literacy, this is no more practicable, as a "modern version of the Tower of Babel" (Stunkel 1989, 330) is now made up by current courses in humanities.

Finally, one of the most plausible arguments for the paradox has to do with the marketplace of humanities. The latter do not cope well with the reductionism of meeting targets on a given market (Stunkel 1989, 331 et. sq). Even if colleges and universities are forced to meet economical demands, values such as learning, truth, beauty, understanding, etc., are not necessarily economic vectors, such that an inherent paradox results from placing instruction in humanities within an economically-competitive realm.

2. Disentangling the Paradox: What Does "Humanities" Mean?

Despite authors trying to connect humanities to formal and natural sciences in one way or another, what we normally understand by "humanities" is still blurry and, to say the least, not definable in a unitary manner. To argue this point, we need only remember that appealing to a list of disciplines such as literature, philosophy, languages, history, etc., does not provide any unitary methodology whatsoever, as it is the case with, say, physics, or chemistry. These disciplines, taken individually, are themselves prone to constant wobbling throughout different methodologies. Take, for example, philosophy, where to the study of the same subjects (e.g., truth, being, and so forth) philosophers apply multiple methodologies pertaining to different currents, such as transcendentalism, nihilism, idealistic phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology, structuralism, deconstruction, and so on. What is interesting is that none of these seems to truly outrun the other, such that the study objects of philosophy still remain approached in a non-unitary manner. Surely, philosophical currents develop one after another throughout history, but my point is that one can equally specialize today in idealism as one can specialize in deconstructivism; both would share equal chances of developing a successful career in philosophy, no matter their specialization, and no matter if the methodologies they adopt within their disciplines differ from one another. Conclusively, human sciences present no coherent method corresponding to the scientific methods from their formal counterparts.

Above I've mentioned that authors nevertheless try to bring humanities and natural sciences closer to one another. Such is the case with Jacob Bronowski, who in his Science and Human Values argued extensively that what the humanities put forth is "imaginative creation," while what science offers is scientific rationality. The two, Bronowski argues, share "hidden likenesses," as rationality needs imagination to challenge traditional patterns of thought, and imagination needs rationality to "temper" it one way or another (Bronowski 1965, 19). This however, has been heavily criticized, as humanities appear to be nothing else than an auxiliary to "true" methodically-enhanced science. While the idea is supported by some historical examples of scientists that had strong creative abilities in an

artistic sense (Loren Eiseley, Lewis Thomas, or even Bronowski himself, as a mathematician, etc.), it does not sufficiently convince that science cannot evolve by itself, without the "help" of humanities, or viceversa.

I suggest that maybe a more prosperous manner of finding out what "humanities" means is not by colligating human sciences with formal / natural ones, but by stressing out their differences and what distinguishes the humanities from their formal counterpart. A first contrast with natural / formal sciences that humanities present is their recognition of the indispensable role of ordinary language. Humanistic insight and "wisdom" depend on access to an immense body of texts and on the availability and interest of the humanist to simply read and understand what is read. It is an obvious exaggeration to say that, in the humanities, all you need in order to do research is to handle a set of algorithms or formulas, or even a set of theories. Details matter in the humanities, to the extent to which they help distinguish a worthy piece of work in human sciences from a weak one (but to this I will return in a few paragraphs). The two main problems for incoherence in the humanities, judging from this point of view, are, then, the institutionalized access to the basis of human sciences (viz., texts), which is a macro-structural problem, and the interest of students in humanities as well as "humanists" themselves to spend their time reading and understanding the written "humanistic legacy," which is a more tangible problem.

As John Simon wrote (Simon 1981), the loss of paradigms (and, thus, the accentuation of the second problem) is reflected not only in the decreasing interest of students in humanities to read and gain a sturdy knowledge base, but also in the lack of action on behalf of professors, who are normally expected to take matters seriously, insisting on serious reading and supporting writing in examinations. Evaluating writing, however, takes a lot of time, and most professors do very little writing themselves. All this only makes matters worse, which is really something to regret, as an ease with language and understanding how language shapes thoughts and experience is a key skill humanities focus on primarily. Long story short, if humanistic

disciplines are the only ones that credit everyday language with such an important role, and students, even after having graduated college, still do not have a firm base of understanding of how this comes to happen, it naturally follows that graduates in humanistic studies really have nothing to do with the actual be-all and end-all of humanities. The importance of scholarly activity in the humanities has also been stressed by Stunkel as follows: "Just as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are religions of the book, unthinkable without their sacred scriptures, so ours is a civilization of the book, indecipherable without the printed page." (Stunkel 1989, 340)

A second contrast between humanities and their more "formal" counterparts lies in the former's focus on non-verbal symbols, or what we refer to as "art" in general. Renouncing the search for the most basic or for the largest particles of the world in order to explain the latter, human sciences turn to what one may call non-discursive symbols, or repositories of meaning. While this is not the case with formal and natural sciences, effective instruction in the humanities cannot do without the arts. This is mainly due to the fact that art puts forth numerous case-limits that almost every time challenge traditional thought and representations. If in Ancient Greece art was supposed to envisage human and architectural perfection, Christian art had to depict sacred phenomena, and Romanticism was all about expressing one's inner feelings as fully as possible, the current state of art and art criticism all the more indicates the crisis of humanities and of all endeavors to actually draw consistent meaning out of contemporary culture.

One aspect of the humanities that has managed to carve its way into formal sciences is the historical-comparative analysis of thought. Since all different disciplines have a history, be them humanistic, natural, or formal, and since historical-comparative analysis tells researchers and academics what exactly is worthwhile to be drawn upon presently within their fields of interest, a certain credibility is entrusted to humanities in order to carry out this analysis. Again, to some extent this sort of cooperation may seem feasible, but only up to the point where humanities are asked to renounce their most basic purpose, that is, reflection on the values of good, beauty, truth, just,

and so forth. Because people fabricate or take up their value systems and science stricto senso attempts to study all phenomena beyond any value, humanities inevitably end up in conflict with their formal counterpart. The nature of humanities, as we have shown, lies in their interest in the lived life of historically-determined societies and language. Since this cannot result in one or more formal principles that may afterwards be applied to all societies and languages, humanities operate a clear-cut distinction between themselves and other sciences. But still, be that the case, can instruction in humanities be integrated into formal education?

3. Instruction in Humanities: Peculiarities of Humanistic Disciplines

When it comes to appreciating which piece of work is worthy in the humanities and which is not, more often than not a criterion that comes about is originality. While in what would normally cope better with "formal" education originality entails production of new theories and new findings, in humanities the term is generally used more broadly, comprising anything from using a new approach to new data (Guetzkow et al. 2004, 190-1). But how do we get originality in humanities to cope with formal, standardized education? We should first of all offer a breakdown of what means to be "original" in human sciences, and then see if this is applicable to instruction in post-secondary education.

Guetzkow (et al.) conducted some empirical research on what means to be original in social sciences and humanities at one of the highest level of scientific exploration, namely when applying for funding at some of the most important research institutions, e.g., the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and so forth. Guetzkow's paper interviews the main referees responsible for accepting research proposals and funding them. It then offers a breakdown on specific concretizations of originality in the envisaged domain, according to some generic types of originality offered by the literature existing before 2004, which the study applied to all 217

research proposals examined by the interviewed reviewers. The results are the following:

	N	% of Total
Original Approach	67	31
Understudied Area	13	6
Original Topic	32	15
Original Theory	40	19
Original Method	27	12
Original Data	29	13
Original Results	9	4
Total	217	100

Table 1. *Breakdown according to Generic Types of Originality (Guetzkow et al., 2004: 197)*

This is a major shift from what was previously supposed to be theoretical novelty in Thomas Kuhn's terms (Kuhn 1970), viz., "production of new theories." In the study presented above, contributions defined as "connecting or mapping ideas" or "producing synthesis of the literature" both received about 30% mentioning as "original," while "production of new theory" received only just above 10% originality "deeming." Here, another important characteristic of the humanities is revealed, with direct relevance to general instruction in the institutionalized teaching of human sciences: humanities scholars are more likely than both natural and social scientists to define originality in the use of new (or "original") data. The interesting aspect is that "data" here refers to everything varying from literary

texts to photographs and musical scores (Guetzkow et al. 2004, 200), which reveals the slightly more "interactive" character of instruction in humanities than in any other disciplines. We therefore believe that it is in no way pure coincidence that humanities contrast formal, natural, and social sciences in that they not only pertain to a knowledge background based upon ordinary language, but in that they also make use of everyday objects, events, and experiences in order to advance in their development.

There is, however, one last important aspect to be acknowledged within the above study, i.e., how humanists, historians, and social scientists typically regard data used within research in their disciplines. While "data" in humanities instruction pertains to written texts, photography, music, film, etc., and is generically referred to as "texts" and "materials," historians refer to the data used in their discipline (i.e., archives and documents) as "evidence." Last but not least, by "data" social scientists refer to quantitative data sets (Guetzkow et al. 2004, 201). The peculiarity of the humanities lies here in a silent implication: it seems that humanities are the sole disciplines where scholars regard data not as something to be merely used in order to confirm or infirm an enunciated hypothesis, but as something from which the meaning of our past, current, and maybe future human condition itself is drawn upon. More concisely, the peculiarity stems here from the original use of methods applied to "cultural" phenomena without making use of the latter in order to demonstrate a theory, but through letting those phenomena themselves "speak" in such a manner that we are enlightened with regard to the essentials of human existence.

This indication of humanities' peculiarities offers the general purpose of instruction in human sciences. Nonetheless, it does not offer concrete directions of how one should implement the instructional process in formal education, a point which will be our focus in what follows. The category of "humanities" comprises, as shown above, text-driven disciplines. Instruction, then, begins with a text or a series of texts. The text selected should drive the development of interpretative abstractions based upon it, that is to say, specific conceptual questions are posed from a text and the goal of

both research and instruction in the humanities is to make any sort of progress in answering them, even if that means formulating other questions or sets of questions (MacDonald 1994, 37). Consequently, if (1) instruction in humanities (at least in post-secondary and graduate education) means bringing the ones being instructed on the path to humanistic originality, and if (2) humanistic originality means opening up new opportunities for interpretation, while, of course, (3) the existence of (a) text(s) precedes the act of interpretation, from (1), (2), and (3) it naturally follows that focusing on new or non-canonical texts can constitute a major manner of carrying out the instructional process in the humanities. Better yet, not only the instructional process, but the whole process of research. This also offers a simple and plausible explanation as to why the industry of book and journal publishing thrives even though humanities per se are currently facing a serious institutional crisis.

Is there, nevertheless, a "deeper," more "personal" side of the instructional process in humanities? Peer-reviewers in humanities seem to associate substantially original work with positive personal moral character. Unoriginal work, on the other hand, comes to be regarded as a sign of moral failure. There is an underlying reason for this, namely that producing work that is socially relevant shows care for real-world problems rather that solipsism. This is not that of a novel idea; researchers (e.g., Latour 1993; Mitroff 1974) have already proven a general tendency among scientists to identify humanists with their object of investigation or favored theoretical perspective. Studies show that while some may be wary of including the moral character of a humanities scholar in the evaluation of their work, others agree that the specific moral characters of researcher in the humanities are limited in scope and do not pertain to every dimension of individual morality, but only to characteristics that are relevant to one's conduct as a scholar. More specifically, "scholastic virtue" entails being a risk-taker with authentic intellectual interests, being serious, hardworking, and committed to producing socially relevant results.

What I've sketched above are two aspects of the implementation of instruction in humanities within a formal educational system: a methodological one, and a "moral," or subjective one. Further

clarification on how the process of instruction works in the humanities is needed. As it is generally conceived, instruction itself breaks down in two essential vectors: quality of teaching and quality of the curriculum (Bennett 1984, 7-12). If the teacher is the guide, the curriculum, then, is the path. We can figure out what basic good teaching and basic good curriculum mean simply by inverting the problems stated in the first section of this paper.

A good curriculum "fights" relativism in that it offers students certain paths to follow within the immense "ocean" of works in the humanities. As identified in 1984 by a special report put together by 31 specialists in the humanities (Bennett 1984), the main characteristics of a curriculum that will enhance efficiency in humanities instructions are the following:

(1) *Balance between breadth and depth*. In jargon terms, this means balance between "wide reading" and "close reading." There is, in the humanities, a sort of conflict between narrow "departmentalism," which promotes excessive concentration in one area, and students' acquainting with texts and subjects offering a broader view on matter studied. One cannot, however, eliminate "departmentalism" from a curriculum, as this would undoubtedly result in shallow generalization and popular stereotypes;

(2) *Original texts*. The report concluded that secondary texts and textbooks are not fit for post-secondary and graduate instruction in the humanities. At a higher level, teaching literature, history, and philosophy should thus only make use of original texts. The general view of the report was that students acquaint with the "power of ideas" in two manners: "second-hand" readings and "first-hand" readings. Only the latter will yield efficient reading, reflecting, discussing, and writing;

(3) *Continuity*. Graduate students are all aware of the paradoxical phenomenon consisting of less time to actually take up learning in humanities due to the increasing administrative duties they have to carry out in their departments. This usually continues throughout their teaching careers, resulting in obsolete and narrow courses to say the least. When we speak of the "sustainability" of the curriculum, we refer to continuous engagement with the humanities embedded in

what is regarded today as "intellectual maturity." In the report, Professor Linda Spoerl, of the Highwire Community College concluded: "The idea that general education requirements should be satisfied as quickly as possible before the student goes on to the 'real' part of education does everyone a disservice." (Bennett 1984, 11)

(4) *Faculty strength*. This incorporates the first vector of effective instruction in the humanities, namely good teaching. It does not do any good to require student competences in analytical metaphysics after graduation if there is no one in the department of philosophy to have those competences him- or herself. Steps should be first of all taken to create a good curriculum in what regards the faculty's strengths, that is, to fill in the gap in the basic fields of humanities;

(5) *Conviction about the centrality of humanities*. More often than not, students in humanities are asked why they have chosen to study the discipline that they have. Two popular answers are (i) that humanities render one more "refined," and (ii) that they allow the young to better understand their feelings, and better express their opinions. Both answers are completely misleading in what regards the genuine purpose of the humanities, that is, to convey "serious truths, defensible judgments, and significant ideas." There would be little reason to offer humanities in institutionalized formal education unless they should focus on the perennial questions of human life in connection with the greatest works of history, literature, philosophy, and art.

There is one last comment I should make on this final point, concerning student expectations and the actual humanities curricula. What Eric Hanushek characterized as the failure of "input-based" schooling policies applies perfectly to the misconception resulting from an incomplete curriculum in what regards point (5). The gist of Hanushek's piece or research (Hanushek 2003, F64-F94) is that input-based schooling policies, that is, those policies that (dramatically) increase the resources devoted to schools in an effort to improve their quality, are less relevant for the latter purpose that continuous student incentives throughout the schooling period itself. While schooling input may seem to be a natural focus, promoting humanities and funding humanities departments does not show any increase in

measured student performance (Hanushek 2003, F71). Thus, curriculum characteristic no. 5 from above implies more than meets the eye when it comes to the end product of instruction in humanities, that is, graduate performance.

4. Conclusions

Conclusively, the instructional crisis in the humanities stems from a destabilization of societal values and meanings. This is not to say, though, that the crisis cannot be tackled. An historical account of the crisis has shown that the conflict of value systems is caused first of all by demographic variety, which in turn raises questions as to how "formal" is the educational system still. In this context, I have shown that humanities fit the societal state of affairs almost perfectly, since the humanistic disciplines themselves are organized as varying "centers of gravity," which actually suits today's political and social decision making and action.

In that, however, I have also found that there lies the differentiation of humanities from their formal counterparts, i.e., formal and natural sciences. Instruction in humanities raises awareness on ordinary language and the power it has to shape thought and experience, it studies everyday objects and events to disentangle the infinite vectors that operate in building inter-personal relations in today's world, and it turns to original written texts to develop students' critical skills of thinking and writing.

Unlike their counterpart, humanities presuppose a moral stratum underlying evaluation in the humanities, in that panelists and referees deem worthy a societal-relevant piece of work rather than a solipsist one. Correspondingly, to embed both this moral substratum, as well as the intrinsic unique characteristics of disciplines into humanities instruction, both institutions and instructors should take into account the series of components an effective curriculum should bear (presented in section 3 of this paper).

References

Bennett, W. J. Nov. 1984. *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*. Report commissioned by the National Endowment for the Humanities at Washington D.C.

Bloom, A. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Bronowski, J. 1965. *Science and Human Values*. New York: Harper & Row.

Dickie, G. 2001. *Art and Value.* Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Guetzkow, J; Lamont, M, & Mallard, G. April, 2004. "What is Originality in the Humanities and the Social Sciences?". *American Sociological Review* 69: 190-212.

Hanushek, E. A. February 2003. "The Failure of Input-Based Schooling Policies". *The Economic Journal* 113 (485): F64-F94 (paper is featured).

Kuhn, T. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. 1993. *Portrait d'un Biologiste en Capitaliste Sauvage. Petites Leçons de Sociologie des Sciences*. Paris: Editions de Points Seuil Sciences.

MacDonald, S. P. 1994. *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Mitroff, I. 1974. *The Subjective Side of Science: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Psychology of the Apollo Moon Scientists*. New York: Elsevier Publishing Co.

Mannheim, K. 1971. "The Crisis in Valuation". In Douglas, J (ed.) *The Technological Threat*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Simon, J. 1981. *Paradigms Lost: Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline*. New York: Penguin Books.

Stunkel, K. R. May-June, 1989. "Obstacles and Pathways to Coherence in the Humanities". *The Journal of Higher Education* 60 (3): 325-348.