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To reference this article / Para citar este artículo / Para citar este artigo

Pérez Álvarez, Álvaro y Antonio Martínez Illán. "Teach Humanities Today". *Humanidades: revista de la Universidad de Montevideo*, n° 15, (2024): 15-19. <https://doi.org/10.25185/15.1>

# Teaching Humanities Today

## Enseñar humanidades hoy

## Ensinar humanidades hoje

The title of this new edition of the *Humanidades. Revista de la Universidad de Montevideo* academic magazine is: "Teaching reading and writing: Humanities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." In current times, teaching Humanities has become more necessary than in other periods. As students are prevented from asking themselves questions and thinking about life or the use of reason to understand their place in the world, classrooms have become spaces where any knowledge that doesn't have an immediate practical use is rejected as "useless knowledge;" that is how Simon Leys calls his set of essays that compile a life's studies (Barcelona, 2011). Leys refers to a premise by Chinese master Zhuan Zi that might help us to understand the concern about Humanities

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “Everyone knows the usefulness of what is useful, but few know the usefulness of what is useless.”

How to instigate the curiosity towards uselessness among students? How to communicate that the teachings of reading may lack a practical use but, as years go by, they might become useful or even fundamental? Internet, mobile phones and artificial intelligence have changed the way we relate to others and the world, as well as how we direct our attention to our environment. It has changed the way of learning. This is obvious, but it needs to be our standpoint. What makes good teaching? What makes good learning in today’s world? From a pedagogic perspective, a possible answer is the need to focus on the background of each student, how teachers and students act, as well as the context of a class or lesson. As a possible answer, we will introduce an example from music, a knowledge area so necessary -or so “useless”- as that of Humanities.

On September 27 of 1880, the *Guildhall School of Music & Drama*, London’s first municipal music school, was opened. The school was first set in a garage of the local council and started functioning with 62 students. Today, Guildhall is a center with 800 music students and 200 theater and scenic production students. The school won the *Teaching Excellence Framework* gold medal awarded by the Office for Students to school and universities to acknowledge educational excellence. They define excellence in teaching based on four aspects: *Well-designed, well-delivered, inclusive and ethical, and reflective and evolving*. Orchestra and opera conductor Pablo González Bernardo (Oviedo, 1975), who studied in this school, affirmed in an interview that conducting could not be taught... but it could be learned. In Guildhall, the music composition program is committed to develop unique composition voices, for which they use several methods: individual lessons, lectures, workshops, composition technique studies, orchestration, electronic music, analysis and aesthetics. However, the fundamental aspect is that the school is committed to work on the pieces created by each student (*to developing your unique voice as a composer means that we will workshop every composition that you write*).

In the current world, students are immerse in uncertainty and they can only find their voice, find out who they are or where they are heading, if they manage to read individually and are taught to read and write. Teachers may have to go through experiences similar to those of composers and orchestra conductors. It is not possible to teach how to be a good teacher; however, it can be learned. Teaching to write music or conducting an orchestra is an art based on the communication of ideas within a human group. Learning how

to teach is a never-ending process. You can learn the tools involved in the learning process, the methodologies, maybe the use of Artificial Intelligence in class today, but these tools must aim to help teachers to find their own way of teaching and understanding how students learn.

Thinking about the ways in which students learn today must be the first step of education. In the last few decades, the main focus has shifted from teaching to learning. Therefore, the new priority is the student and the process, and efforts in this direction include the creation of laws, methodologies and teaching programs. In some cases, the focus is completely put on methodologies, which become the main goal (case studies, collaborative learning, project-based learning); in others, it remains limited to bureaucracy and improvisation in class. As mentioned above, today's students face an uncertain world and together we need to learn how to read again.

This edition expects to contribute with specific tools for humanities teachers to persist on their struggle. Teaching humanities demands teachers to prioritize the deep and unhurried study of useless matters; you can't teach what you don't profess - a word that is etymologically close to "professor." The conclusions of the articles included in this magazine prove so.

"Reading and wisdom," by Jorge Peña Vial, points out the importance of the classics and the need to emphasize their value compared to other forms of entertainment, thus urging to share the positive impact these writings have on readers.

Meanwhile, "Children's literature in the technological world and technology in the world of children's literature. Considerations beyond formats and education strategies," by Andrea Beatriz Pac, Susana Mabel Bahamonde and María Nieves Skvarca, shows the relations between children's literature and technology by exploring how this combination leads to valuable narrative experiences, while showing that technology is not integrated into other literary works.

Irma Colanzi's "Writing as professional orientation strategy among college students from the Psychology Degree (UNLP)" includes student surveys and an exhaustive literature research in order to suggest reading and writing strategies in class, targeting the research in social sciences in general, and in the Psychology degree in particular.

The text "We shall write. Teaching writing in the Communications Degree by Universidad de Montevideo," by María Victoria Gómez Márquez, conducts

a historical analysis of how writing is taught in a Communications School. Therefore, the work assesses the knowledge of orthographic and grammatical rules, defines the characteristics of a high-quality reading program, and points out personalized revision and students' self-revision as crucial tools to improve expression levels in class.

Lastly, the article "Music for a literature class" by Paloma Torres Pérez-Solero is based on a teaching experience that combines the interpretation of a literary text by Lázaro Carreter y Correa Calderón with the musical ideas of Daniel Barenboim, showing how a literature class that integrates music succeeds in improving reading skills and provides students with interpretative techniques.

This edition concludes with an interview by Jesús Baiget Pons to Spanish philosopher and professor emeritus of the Navarra University, Rafael Alvira Domínguez (1924-2024), who died on February 4th. The obituaries published in the local press include messages from students who remember Rafael Alvira as a simple, wise man who made efforts to instill critical thinking in each one of them. This interview is a proud homage to a professor that caused an exceptional impact in Spain and Latin America and became milestone for generations of philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic. The battle of teaching humanities is tough, but in Alvira's words, we should keep on struggling. In fact, the text offers keys to approach this issue:

1. "Socratic dialog (which I believe to be the main dialog model) integrates the two loves: the love for subject being taught and the love for the student [...] Masters should not boast about their knowledge, they should instead want their disciples to find the inner truth we all hold and bring it to light." For this reason, "good teachers proudly want disciples to exceed them, since this proves how good they have been as teachers; that is how it should be."
2. The connection between the passion about knowledge and the concern for students is easily detectable in his words: "When a teacher truly loves knowledge, that is noticeable. Students also experience it [...]. Life transmits life."
3. Evidently, this work is not always pleasant and it is certainly challenging: "Sometimes it's exasperating, because you want people to be interested in you and your speech, and sometimes you fail to achieve so." But when this happens, you must "persist, keep on trying without pushing it."

But let us return to the comparison with the work of an orchestra conductor. In the same interview we initially quoted, conductor Pablo González acknowledged that during his studies he became impressed by two master conductors, Sir Colin Davies (1927-2013) and Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1929-2016). Nevertheless, it wasn't their conduction skills what he admires, but their determination and focus regarding musical details. Their inexorable inclination to search rather than find was what caught Pablo's eye regarding the two conductors. Teachers do not offer discoveries; they share the search with students. On December 5th of 2015, the day Harnoncourt turned 86, he announced his retirement. Being aware he would not be able to honor the commitments assumed for upcoming concerts, he dedicated a handwritten letter to the audience of the Musikverein concert hall in Vienna, where he performed as a conductor. That letter evidences Harnoncourt's prestige as a conductor and also helps understanding how the commitment of a conductor is similar to that of a teacher. Harnoncourt wrote: "Dear audience: My physical strength requires me to cancel my future plans. An incredibly deep relationship has developed between us on the stage and you in the hall - we have become a happy community of discoverers! The current season is still at the forefront of my mind; stay true to it! Yours." If we can turn a class into a "happy community of discoverers," as Hanoncourt says, much or some of it shall remain.

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