

# How can we keep on talking about learning? Pandemic time and the threat of an art education watched on screen <sup>i</sup>

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**Abstract:** Around the world, pandemic crises is changing how we perceive the meaning of social, cultural, professional and educational aspects of our lives. In Portugal, as a result of the lockdown measures, the government relaunched the educational television through the program *#estudoemcasa* (*#studyathome*). A partnership was formed between the education ministry and the public television station to carry out *#estudoemcasa* from mid-April till the end of June. This program was presented as “the new classroom” aiming to support student’s learning from different schooling levels. Art education emerged as a subject in which different contents were mixed and broadcasted weekly in the same schedule (visual arts, music and performing arts). Although describing a real situation that could be understood as a case study, I don’t intend to follow this approach, to call on a good practice example, but rather to reflect on the hegemony of models and discourses that, in a naturalized way, still prevail in art education learning.

**Keywords:** potency, thinking, unlearn, art education

## Introduction

This text articulates different concerns about the meaning that school life acquired as a result of the social confinement caused by the covid-19 pandemic<sup>2</sup>. I am referring to the educational television, a technological medium whose reality, bringing to light the memory and the experience of a past time, has now resurfaced in the context of the different measures imposed by the Portuguese Government, in order to ensure that the lives of thousands of students, parents and teachers were not interrupted by the pandemic. However, a major question arises: how can we keep on talking about school – or a “school life” – on the sidelines of the suspension of everyday life? Will we truly be

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<sup>2</sup> In June 2020 I have the opportunity to publish part of this text on PÚBLICO newspaper. This is an extended version of that article which includes some of the topics and reflections that I have been working on.

able to reflect upon "school", and an idea of "learning", without interrupting the logic behind this new beginning?

Let us place ourselves within the interruption, highlighting the discontinuity of the life contexts with which we currently deal, and intentionally pointing out, as in a *brisure*, to remember Jacques Derrida (2006), some starting points inherent to the beginning of the educational television, in particular the time dedicated to the so-called art education.

## **1 Interruption and strangeness**

Therefore, it is from the interruption that we want to pursue, implying a strangeness that is uncomfortable in relation to the idea of a School whose tradition continues to sustain itself in a hegemony of knowledge and practices made natural and unquestionable. In fact, in the light of the modern European states, the enormity of functions assigned to School go beyond the problem of formal learning, even if this first purpose remains visible in the argument used by most current political discourses. As a result of an ideal of progress, the problem of modern education systems was formulated on the basis of a program of socialization, citizenship and market, and it will have been at the expense of this universal program that the School institution has managed to guarantee, to this day, its social, cultural and economic continuity. Despite several changes observed on pedagogical discourses produced about the meaning of the School (at least since the second half of the XIX century), we continue to regard it as one of the main instruments to support the cultural project of each nation in relation to the identities, the bodies and the individual regimes.

School has always praised the hegemonic values of an eurocentred culture, and the way in which such values are inscribed in a dominant grammar erasing others considered epistemologically minor, is based on an learned framework of social and educational relations. The order of geniality is, in this regard, symbolic of the hegemony of powers that dominates school language. Artistic, literary or scientific, what matters is that it serves a certain conception of culture regarding our own individual and collective consciousness, but above all a latent consciousness as people of a nation, and whose tradition and history continue to be invested by the school *dispositif* (Foucault, 1997).

One example is the case of a 9th grade Portuguese Language class on the *Os Lusíadas* by the Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões, in which the form and structure of the literary work were presented as a result of the "genius of a single man". Such evidence is, first of all, formally celebrated by the School, it is validated as a canon, but through a violent gesture of dissolution of other bodies

and worlds that the idea of "work of art" never lets us see. The main consequence of the School persisting in the order of geniality is to transform the act of thinking about the world into an act of civility and consensus. Given the desire to comply the bodies and their subjectivities (preparing them for work, for culture, for the community, etc.) School emerged in Western societies as a normative institution. According to this 'will', as Foucault (*idem*) proposed, and further perpetuated by the use of mechanisms increasingly specialized in the surveillance and control of differences, School, idealistically built on behalf of a plural Humanism, yet, it still remains under an homogeneous ground.

## **2 Myth and possibility**

So, in this pandemic time what possibilities are open to think of an art education whose rationality complies with the political demands imposed on it? We inherited from Paulo Freire (1993) the important assumption that every educational act constitutes, in itself, a political act. Therefore, it is important to look at the current telematics pedagogies that, profoundly and unequivocally, are changing the course of our personal and professional lives and questioning the political and aesthetic sensitivities in the art education class watched on screen.

One of the main issues relates to the instrumentalization of teachers, their actions and the artistic pedagogies conveyed by the program *#estudoemcasa* (*#studyathome*). It is not up to us to evaluate the actual performance of the teachers on screen; rather, what we are interested in is the subordination of teachers' action to a logic of instructing information, but whose frontier with pedagogical entertainment is easily crossed given the adoption of strategies and materials that are ready to use (publishing products, digital tools, etc.). It is true that these same teaching resources are present in regular classrooms. And it is also true that in most cases the teacher's work is captured by the hovering flight of publishers over schools. But it is unsettling, in the two weeks in which we attend some art education classes, we realize that such resources and communication strategies are established in a capital, purely automatic and passive way.

Following its practical uses, as an omnipresence, we noticed the disempowerment with which teachers report contents about "color" from an ethnocentric psychology approach, according to which black and white are always associated with negative or positive feelings. If the flow of these types of associations seems indifferent as long as they occur within a classroom, in which emotions and sensations are seen as synonymous with feelings, it will not be upsetting, then, that, at the foundation of this discourse, much of the social and gender representations used to talk about pink

or blue are still reproduced. During this class of art education "from the 1st to the 9th grade" (as the program defines it) we've seen how the indolence or the benignity of a discourse are produced at the same time with the temptation of the expressive, but in a naturalized framework of concepts and knowledge seemed as consensual.

The revival of this educational television concurred with more and more school, an idea of learning whose (schooling) model is permanently increased by the doctrines of effectiveness and performance. Always useful, the time dedicated to studying does not allow an idea of thinking conceived as the space of the *paradoxa*, using Deleuze's word (2000), that is, a space for the potency of thought – which is the reason for learning – could arise in the very act of thinking. To do so, it would be necessary to interrupt and discontinue the logic of the school itself, creating a possibility to look at this educational television as a displacement movement, not as a simple adjustment. The image of a classroom, on television, that in everything resembles the reality more or less known to us, represents, in fact, the quest for the mythical form of consensus, of truth, according to which knowledge is perceived from the point of view of the natural law (light). From its origins, schooling model has pursued this quest, and the teacher's actions, inside or outside the school field, seems to remain, for all purposes, subject to this instrumental and dogmatic image of what it means to learn.

In one class, the concepts of point, line and texture are explained and repeated, whose examples are later associated with artistic production and references to known artists. In this same class, but now on music, the teachers are using "active listening" whose resource – a publisher exercise about time and improvisation – defines the rules by which this time can and should occur. Finally, the technological and linguistic apparatus that takes place revoke any potency of thinking, because its order is conducted by a method whose applicability is already defined. The primacy of a stylistic and formal model during this class of art education, despite the blend of expressive languages underlying its format, match with a logic of pedagogy whose rationality is continuously grounded by cognitive psychology. Summaries, lists of contents, learning objectives, etc., such elements are precisely a reflection of the appropriation that psychology has made of the territory of educational and artistic practices. But it is in a context of hyper-virtualization that this phenomenon is now taking place (the virtual that is the educational television within the virtual device itself), subjecting teacher's actions to a technical instrumentation of advices, reports and pedagogical precepts, in an apparent absence of voice and authorship.

In this scenario, and once defeated by the virtual machine, teachers have become those kind of professionals who want to "pull out all the stops" and who "try their best to make it work". With

commitment and passion, the classes became an act of generosity, a guarantee and promise that teachers are still present – they have always been there – ready for a fight that seems to have threatened the existence of the school itself. Although, might have been this threat a possibility to rethink the textbook that dominates school, recreating its hegemonic institutional texture from a political point of view, that is, assuming the conflict, and not just the idea of hope, as a vital process to another meaning of art education whose urgent need, in this pandemic, is of paramount importance.

### **Final Notes**

Becomes clear, depending on the curriculum guidelines, that this educational television results in a cognitive reprogramming learning (edited by the Portuguese public television station and the education ministry), with no regarding to the social and political context of setting up those guidelines and how it relates with a meaning of learning. The reality of this educational television could, in fact, highlight the problem of schooling model and shift it to a deep public debate whose logic would allow questioning its own forms of legitimation.

Thinking and learning are not innate features, no matter what the knowledge field, and therefore the problem does not rely only in the formal method that chain the different art education exercises. The problem that lies before us has a range that goes beyond the strict notion of this social repair that the educational television embodies. Investing, in a problematic way, in the interpretation of the time we live means to acknowledge, in the political context, the breakdown of the economic, social and educational models that we have known until now – the failure, as we say, of our own lifestyles. To what extent will we be able to rethink the hegemony of such models? By which means will we be able to "unlearn" mythologies, as Nora Sternfeld (2016) states, that we take as safe, natural, sure? The pandemic should be the space to radically think other world. Never before has so much been said about "pedagogy" in the context of the measures defined by the Portuguese Government, including school, health and law enforcement. Could this be the chance to bring on another pedagogy about the meaning of our place in the landscape, in the cities, in our homes, in our work? A possibility opens up if we go against an idea of moral and common sense in which we have been taught to follow.

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