

## Communication and hermeneutics for inclusion

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Hermeneutic pedagogy represents a problematical and critical approach. Hermeneutics allows to look at education as a possibility rather than a necessity, ensuring respect to the weakest and the difference. The hermeneutic paradigm is thus a strategy for critical emancipation and for conscientization.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, education, emancipation, awareness, problematic approach.

### Для цитаты:

Салмери Стефано Коммуникация и герменевтика в рамках инклюзии [Электронный ресурс] // Язык и текст langpsy.ru. 2016. Том 3. №1. URL: <http://psyjournals.ru/langpsy/2016/n1/Salmeri.shtml> (дата обращения: дд.мм.гггг) doi: 10.17759/langt.2016030107

### For citation:

Salmeri Stefano Communication and hermeneutics for inclusion [Elektronnyi resurs]. *Jazyk i tekst langpsy.ru* [*Language and Text langpsy.ru*], 2016, vol. 3, no. 1. Available at: <http://psyjournals.ru/langpsy/2016/n1/Salmeri.shtml> (Accessed dd.mm.yyyy) doi: 10.17759/langt.2016030107

For Greek philosophers, the term hermeneia designated the interpretation of oracles. In the contemporary world, however, it has taken on a broader acceptance: it refers to different thought orientations in relation to levels of pertinence in the interpretation of reality. To interpret is to go back from the signifier to the signified to decode levels of meaning. In the field of education, it is to decipher and define the teacher/student and teaching/learning relationship.

In the current pedagogical debate, hermeneutics aspires to a distinctive character allowing it to be incorporated into educational practice. This is especially true if we understand education as Bildung, insofar as it refers to language, historicity and contextualization; it reveals deep meanings, also in teaching/learning dynamics; it involves circular interactions between totality and singularity (and vice versa); it postulates that the interpreter knows more than the author of any text by virtue of the interpretive act in itself; and it sees tradition as an inspiration, not a constraint.

Interpretation thus even becomes a key to read symbols. For Pareyson<sup>1</sup>, it is infinite and inexhaustible in character. In pedagogical terms, a hermeneutic approach is crucial for acknowledging otherness and accepting it on a symmetrical plane, to reject any discrimination. Pedagogical hermeneutics makes the most of individuality. It integrates different individuals in a democratic and libertarian spirit. It reduces dependence in favor of autonomy, to make every student the protagonist of his or her learning process.

<sup>1</sup> Pareyson L., *Ontologia della libertà*, Torino, Einaudi, 1996

Today the fragmentation of knowledge, the excessive breaking down of content, and a subservient attitude vis-à-vis mass media information have undermined people's interpretive capabilities. Young people run the risk of lacking both shared logical categories and a common semantic dimension. A communicational Babel and linguistic barbarism have arisen again, whereby words and interpretive categories turn into individual and closed variables. People do not communicate anymore. Even the simplest messages are exposed to misunderstanding. When communication becomes impossible, the specter of failure looms over educators. Only in a school where teaching methods and the content of teaching are clear can one strive to restore the dignity of knowledge, making the most of the peculiarities of each discipline and promoting an actual cultural internalization and assimilation, taking account of the educational needs of each student.

A correct educational relationship can expand knowledge, motivate students, help them to develop a logic of their own, structure their language, and promote interaction. Contextualization and dialogue are indeed essential conditions for effective communication. Hermeneutic pedagogy holds that comprehension is the end and means of human communication, a guarantee of intersubjectivity. In present-day school, the issue of comprehension is still overlooked, since teachers are too concerned with the reproduction of knowledge and neglect heuristics and hermeneutics, which involve systematically addressing complexity.

Hermeneutic pedagogy seeks to keep alive questions about and in the world, to keep students from giving up on the effort to interpret. Hermeneutics espouses the Socratic view that human beings are such insofar as they search for and know themselves, and starting from this knowledge gain awareness of otherness and the polychromy of difference.

Hermeneutic pedagogy theorizes that the subject plans the totality of meaning within which individual objects, whether aesthetic or natural, are arranged. These objects need to be interpreted, but can always be placed within the context of comprehension as an activity. In a pedagogical perspective, interpretation cannot be simply reduced to a hermeneutics of text; students find meanings in a text/context, and it is up to them to reorganize these meanings on their own. As an attestation of another subject's intention, otherness is thus the marker of an interpretive need. A hermeneutic educational experience cannot be reduced either to a free interplay of imagination and intellect, or to a moral intention. To become a significant and productive experience, action requires exchange and its prerequisite is a participated and participating communication, where one subject listens to the other.

Hermeneutic pedagogy espouses Habermas' conception of unlimited and non-authoritarian communication<sup>2</sup>. Ideal communication is consensual. The partners in an equal relationship meet the four fundamental requirements of discourse – comprehensibility, mutual understanding, truthfulness, and rightfulness – and set aside general and particular practical interest for the sake of universal and shared communication.

For hermeneutic pedagogy, action and reaction, teaching and learning constitute a network or, more precisely, an inter-human game. Such a game would be impossible without limits and rules allowing communication founded on reciprocal respect, which is an ethical category as well as an educational imperative. It is not unpredictable interaction that threatens the order of human relations, but the character of contemporary culture, which has coerced freedom of action and thought into certain finalized mechanisms, viz., production, effectiveness, economic efficiency, and the exploitation of resources and human beings regarded as mere cogs in the market system. As an opening towards complexity, the hermeneutic paradigm strives to restore meaning to the educational relationship by addressing issues of tradition, text and language, by investigating the horizons of the possible in relation both to the subject and to culture, so that the interpretans and the interpretandum will not be

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<sup>2</sup> Habermas H., *Agire comunicativo e logica delle scienze sociali*, tr. it., Bologna, Il Mulino, 1980

mechanically linked, but will interact according to a project of search and discovery within a constructive dialogue.

Pedagogical hermeneutics aspires to a *coniunctio oppositorum* prefiguring the encounter of the visible and the invisible, the finite and the infinite, that the Other may cease to be my absolute Outside to become my limit, which I am under the obligation to address to know it and, at the same time, know myself. As Bertin<sup>3</sup> argues, the unlimited task of pedagogy becomes being oneself while being the other, but also being the other while being oneself, in a reciprocity that never invades the other's vital space.

Hermeneutic pedagogy espouses Gadamer's<sup>4</sup> perspective of the merging of horizons, which imposes the construction of new vocabularies for the integration of different cultures<sup>5</sup>. Against an integratory background, these cultures experiment with reciprocal acknowledgement, which is only possible through a logical extension of politics and education to the issue of dignity and human rights. According to Habermas<sup>6</sup>, acknowledgement of equality is no longer sufficient to achieve integration, being a mystification of the actual issue if this equality is intended as an acritical *a priori*. Integration requires shared communication in a context capable of transcending the boundaries of individual selfishness to favor relationships.

The aim of hermeneutic pedagogy is to devise strategies to immerse the involved subjects in the educational relationship. These strategies should lead to the mixing and involvement of the participants. They should seek interpretive keys allowing individual communicational situations to be delineated and the future to be planned as conscious growth for all the students.

According to the hermeneutic paradigm, learning and thinking are not separable from the individuality of the person, because in the educational relationship we are confronted with a subject seeking to internalize and master knowledge. If we separate the subject from his or her activity, we run the risk of losing sight of the specificity of each student. Separation is dangerous. It is as if we tried to derive the properties of water from those of hydrogen and oxygen. In education, communication should be understood as a web, a system, a relationship. Like a stigma or any all-embracing conception, a unilateral approach obscures the infinite aspects of each subject and thus shuts the gates of the possible, which alone can provide access to otherness.

Indeed, our identity is defined by its being acknowledged, unacknowledged, or rejected by others. Identity is the result of a process of negotiation between ourselves and the world. This dialogicity is the fundament of educational communication. Only awareness of one's identity grants us a fullness of being allowing us to attribute a meaning to ourselves and even to accept doubt. From the moment that the mirror is internalized, human relationships can be modified. The Other ceases to be a reflecting surface, a sort of crutch for our narcissistic dissatisfactions, and gains the dignity of an autonomous identity that is legitimated to enter in a relationship with us.

Indeed, the mind is a finite archive of infinite data. The human limit is dictated by space-time contingency, which forces us to operate along the span of our existence. The processing of data, however, is different from subject to subject, and hence unlimited. The hermeneutic paradigm – the negotiation of value and content in problematic terms – seeks and finds its place precisely in the exploration of horizons of meaning within an infinite universe. As in science, in educational communication discovery is more important than simply doing one's homework or answering correctly. Hermeneutic pedagogy thus promotes inclusion and makes the most of difference by activating democratic pathways favoring a culture of participation exalting the specificity of the student in his or her relational, communication and integration process.

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<sup>3</sup> Bertin G. M., *Educazione alla ragione*, Roma, Armando, 1973

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer H. G., *Verità e metodo*, tr. it., Milano, Bompiani, 1983

<sup>5</sup> Tarozzi M., *Cittadinanza interculturale. Esperienza educativa come agire politico*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Habermas H., *L'inclusione dell'altro*, tr. it., Milano, Feltrinelli, 1998

As a science, pedagogy hence should not presume to dispense truth, but should present itself as a gradual path towards truth. There is a relationship of incommensurability between truth and pedagogy as a science, because you never access complexity as a totality and because interpretation depends on the perspective of the actors of the educational relationship. From a hermeneutic standpoint, in pedagogy one must refer to a mobile Archimedean point to define the relationship between truth and reality. This because hermeneutics implies objectivity and critical ability. A science that hesitates to forget or revise its fundamentals runs the risk of being bogged down in a dogmatic mire, fearful of change and innovation.

In a hermeneutic framework, education is a strategy that facilitates communication and comprehension in a dialogue between equals capable of steering towards cooperation and democratic practices. “To communicate” means to link, put into contact, establish a relationship between one or more subjects, clearly distinguishing between the sender and the recipient of the message. For Jakobson<sup>7</sup>, there are five indispensable elements in communication: sender, recipient, code, content, variable relationship. The word “communication” expresses a tension arising from the construction of the Other as an existing subject. It defines the segmentation of reality, the prerequisite for the verbal representation of the dialogue between a subject and the world, and the basis of any relational contact and any possible acknowledgement of difference.

Since hermeneutic thought can harmonically incorporate pluralism, the Other ceases to be a destabilizing menace. Hermeneutics rejects a non-systematic approach in investigation, because comprehension requires reference parameters to avoid stereotypes and disorientation.

Interpretation generates frameworks of meaning whereby the image listens to the light and sees silence, and the word evokes webs of meaning that are open to symbolic infinity and no longer bound to the semantic dimension, as in Joyce and Beckett. Image and word thus rise to the dignity of simulacra of systems of continuous reference from sign to sign, whereby fiction and reality meet hermeneutically to merge or separate. In a language of profundity, which is necessary for a critically emancipating education, words take a back seat. The only possible language is then the metaphorical one, in which reality is encoded through a cabalistic paradigm that captures and attracts, as in Kafka and Musil.

To teach somebody something is to induce the Other, the student, to change the relationship he or she has entertained so far with that specific branch of knowledge. To educate is to modify the relationship between the knowing subject and the known object by constantly raising the issue of what to do next, which stimulates investigation and invites questions. To possess a rich and structured vocabulary is to have access to different sign systems and multiple worlds that language is capable of deciphering and representing. Taken singularly, words rarely have a meaning; they acquire one in association with other words, within a semantic context and a factual horizon of reference. Every proposition is a candidate for truth or falsehood, to be defined within a specific linguistic game whose rules forbid the contemporaneous assertion of opposites. To disregard the rules is to place oneself outside of the linguistic game. Intelligence, on the other hand, is a mobile web of specialized abilities following specific rules of thought and language. Like hermeneutics, the theory of linguistic games stresses the prospective character of interpretation, which is never neutral learning of something that is static, since every act of comprehension is not justified in itself, but is informed by a context of meaning that is at once apparent and concealed.

Learning is fundamentally an activity. It does not end in the answering behavior or the registration of stimuli present in the ever changing and complex context, but is a transformation producing a concrete change both in content and in its relationship with the context. Hermeneutically, learning involves recursiveness. It draws on what has been learned previously, on a linguistic and experiential substrate that determines the commensurability between what is already known and

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<sup>7</sup> Jakobson R., *La scienza del linguaggio*, tr. it., Roma-Napoli, Theoria, 1986

what must be learned. An excessively lofty educational proposal will be incomprehensible, a banal one will mortify and demotivate the student. Pedagogical hermeneutics rejects both banality and unnecessary complication. It is thought that orients comprehension, favors dialogue and searches for truth, and truth is a shared treasure, not a perishable commodity for immediate consumption. Communication, language, tradition, historical praxis and the social context allow the construction of versions of the world and investigations on truth which regard difference not as a limitation, but as an occasion for dialogue.

Due to the centrality it attributes to words and all other signs, pedagogical hermeneutics tries to overturn the dominating orthodoxy's discrediting of difference to allow difference to legitimately enter into a communicative exchange on an equal basis, finding a path to the real inclusion of weaker subjects.

For pedagogical hermeneutics, education thus ceases to feature a clash between dominant groups and weak subjects, turning into a positive tension aimed at harmonic growth founded on complementarity and participation in a shared and democratic communication. The infinite goal is Kant's Kingdom of Ends, in which man is always the end and never the means, where each must have the courage of using his or her intellect and be simultaneously subject and sovereign.

Hermeneutic pedagogy is knowledge of one's limits, shared communication, interpretation and comprehension, experience of passage and crossing of the threshold between one universe of meanings and the next, according to the criteria of a multiversal horizon of complex systems of meanings and of codes endlessly referring back to other codes. Truth then consists in the awareness of the frameworks that, like mobile webs, delimit each subject within a system. This mosaic of sorts is able to grant sense and significance to truth in education, as in games and in the theater. When we are involved in a game or watch a play, we inevitably identify with the proposed fictitious reality and at once believe and do not believe. Likewise, we need to acknowledge the sense of different educational contexts to delimit them as areas of meaning in the name of a geography of interpretation and comprehension. In many ways, to search for meaning in education and communication, especially with regard to difference, is still to come out of the Platonic cave to increment a propensity to a critical attitude that is not mere investigation on and for truth, but also an attempt at restoring the value and dignity of each subject, trying to trace mobile frameworks for each horizon of knowledge and for relationships producing dialogue, encounters, and solidary and inclusive communication.

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## Коммуникация и герменевтика в рамках инклюзии

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Герменевтическая педагогика представляет собой проблемный и критический подход. Герменевтика позволяет рассматривать образование как возможность, а не необходимость.

**Key Words:** герменевтика, образование, эмансипация, осознание, проблемный подход.

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