



# What Is a Class? On the Simmelian Art of Learning and Teaching

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## Résumé de l'article

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## *What Is a Class? On the Simmelian Art of Learning and Teaching*

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Abstract. *This paper focus on School Pedagogy, a course taught by Simmel at the end of his life in Strasbourg University. The intention is to convey that Simmel's pedagogy is not an isolated chapter within his theory, but it shows principles present throughout his work and that are here applied in the pedagogical field. For this end, it first briefly outlines Simmel's trajectory previous to teaching this course; then it concentrates in analyzing key points of the relation between Simmel's art of teaching and learning and his works as a whole, to conclude which a group of practical points.*

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As stated by Simmel, a class is a type of relation, an exchange of reciprocal effects (*Wechselwirkung*) between the teacher and his audience<sup>1</sup>. Hence, to be a real class it requires the active condition of both parts, encouraging questions and vivid conversation. “Nothing could be further from a class than a teacher’s monolog” (Simmel, 2004: 361).

As a general principle, the movement and progress of the class must rise from the questions raised by the teacher. The key to

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<sup>1</sup> For Simmel, *Wechselwirkung* “means that what a social actor (an individual, a group, or a social configuration) is doing, perceiving, or expecting, has an impact on what another social actor is doing, perceiving, or expecting. That every *Wechselwirkung*, in spite of its freely selectable content, must select certain forms of socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*) in order to articulate itself "socially". *Wechselwirkung* does not stratify arbitrarily, but in certain forms into a dynamic overall structure to which Simmel gives the concept of socialization” (Häußling, 2018; 588). The concept of *Wechselwirkung* is a central core in Simmel’s relational sociology; but –as we would like to point out- also in his global thinking, including his pedagogical proposal.

success lies in the audience attentiveness. Without a degree of students' attentiveness, there is no class. Every attention is an expectation (Ibid.). Attentiveness in class does not always need to lead to surprise, but it requires keeping a certain pace, a certain state of tension between the awareness of the current segment of the treated object and the following one. The state of expectation in a class requires the continuity of a thought that flows. This is the reason why it is important not to tear topics apart in isolated pieces during the class – which causes no expectation to arise among them – but to form a unity where the ideal reference of what is already given and what is not given yet become manifest.

The attitude of the teacher should focus on the objects of knowledge as well as on the singularities of his students, to whom he should turn his gaze in a personal sense. Adjusting the voice to be on a par with the craft of teaching is also significant. The strength and the adequate tone of the voice are of great importance to dominate the class, "speaking in a monotone hypnotizes" (Simmel, 2004: 368). The tone in which affirmations and questions are expressed is very important. A teacher should show his own interest in the object of his exposition, the first condition to raise the correct disposition in students is for the teacher to feel it himself. When a teacher presents things for which he feels engaged, he will also raise a special interest in his students.

Under these conditions, a class can become an extraordinary vital moment if it achieves to stand against current tendencies, to mechanization and to intellectualization (Simmel, 2004: 388). A teacher should avoid pouring an amount of objective knowledge on his students as if these were mere receptacles. Likewise, he should not take it to the extreme of offering teaching material without worrying about the condition of the students. Or in the opposite extreme, he should not be a policeman who does not care about the person of the student but "only about the good or wrong that must be proved in them" (Simmel, 2004: 353). Taking these precautions into account and providing an exposition where there would always be room for a framework to put into play the unexpected, results in

a valuation of the class experience that can cause a long-term effect experience... for the students and for the teacher.

Such is how Georg Simmel expresses himself towards the end of his life when he teaches a course named *School Pedagogy* (*Schulpädagogik*) aimed to young pedagogues from Strasbourg University during the winter semester of 1915/1916<sup>2</sup>. Even though the explicit aim of this course is to impart practical knowledge – focused, in a strict sense, to training pedagogues –, in a broader sense his discourse extends to a vaster field in which pedagogy overlaps with life.

These two planes – that of practices in educational institutions, and in life – are constant throughout his exposition, where we can perceive his vitalistic and relational conception, for which teaching and learning are dynamic and related acts. In the flow of life, we teach and we learn.

In what follows, I pretend to contribute to the recovery of this little-known work of Simmel for its use in the pedagogical practices we teachers carry out in a daily basis, and in addition, to connect this intervention on pedagogy with the more general sense of his theoretical thought. My intention is not to consider *School Pedagogy* in the light of the development of the pedagogical ideas, nor of the debates of the current field of pedagogy; but in its links with Simmel's philosophical and sociological thinking. I shall contend that Simmel's pedagogy is not an isolated chapter within his theory, but it shows principles present throughout his philosophical and sociological work and that are here applied in the pedagogical field. To this end, I will first briefly outline Simmel's trajectory in the context of his life and work previous to teaching this course in

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the last courses that the author offers towards the end of his life and appeared posthumously published as a book, *Schulpädagogik. Vorlesungen, gehalten an der Universität Strassburg*. The first edition is from 1922 (Osterwieck/Harz: A.W. Zickfeldt). In 1999, it was re-edited by Klaus Rodax (Konstanz: UVK). In 2004, GSG 20, ed. by Torge Karlsruhe and Otthein Rammstedt (Simmel, 2004). There are translations of this book into italian (Simmel, 1995), and spanish (Simmel, 2008).

Strasbourg University, to concentrate then in analyzing points of the relation between these considerations on the art of teaching and learning and Simmel's works as a whole, from which a group of practical points should be summarized.

### 1. From Berlin to Strasbourg

When Simmel set out to expose his pedagogy he had already published most of his works that included his contributions to psychology, epistemology, the theory of history, moral, sociology, philosophy of culture, aesthetics and metaphysics. We find recursive elements from this extensive and varied work now applied to the field of pedagogics in a vitalistic way. Throughout the course about *School Pedagogy* that Simmel taught, we can acknowledge among other structuring topics of his thought, the reminiscences of the contradiction between life and form, the formulation of the tragedy of culture, his defence of individual creativity and his pledge to the flow of life and the valuation of its different instants.

But besides, being Simmel in the prime of his life he was an experienced professor that had already overcome many obstacles to arrive at the moment when he eventually achieved a full professorship. It is possible even today to consult the directory, of the currently French, Strasbourg University payroll of ordinary professors of "Die philosophische Fakultät" in which *Professor Dr. Georg Simmel* appears. He had gone through a winding road that led him from Berlin to Strasbourg in 1914.

Up to this moment, the bad relationship that Simmel kept with academic bureaucracies throughout his career had been a constant. It would have been difficult that the personal consequences of this situation would not influence his perception of the relations within the space of educational institutions. So, implicitly – as some years before he could have said elliptically, the circulation of secrets and hypocrisy within university institutions in his *great Sociology*<sup>3</sup> – Simmel

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<sup>3</sup> The chapter "Das Geheimnis und die Geheime Gesellschaft" (Simmel, 1992: 383-455).

makes observations in the *Schulpädagogik* about the relation between the teacher and the school bureaucratic organization that can be interpreted as an allusion to the inconveniences he suffered with the university officials in his Berlin era.

Simmel imparted all his university courses between Berlin and Strasbourg. And his institutional difficulties went by during his years in Berlin, his own city in whose university he had also studied, not without experiencing since the beginning of his studies these kinds of sorrows. Even at the moment of his graduation, his doctoral thesis was rejected. His dissertation on the origins of music based in psychological observations and on a broad ethnological register had to be replaced by a second intent with a study on Kant and the monads of Leibniz in 1881. Afterward, his habilitation lecture also received objections and then his condition as *Privatdozent* – a post where he lacked the economic and political rights of University life – was too prolonged. Also, his failed intents of achieving a position in Heidelberg in 1908 and then in 1915 and 1916<sup>4</sup> are all episodes that show the mistreatment that Simmel received from the university bureaucracy and *establishment*.

During the long years when he took part in the life of the University of Berlin, Simmel played an active role in the intellectual and cultural life of the capital, capturing the attention of wide audiences of students and many of the prominent figures of that time – some colleagues that expressed admiration for his ideas were Edmund Husserl, Heinrich Rickert, Hans Vaihinger, Hermann Keyserling – but despite this recognition, his status as a professor always fell behind. Likewise, some of his articles were celebrated and required for translation out of Germany as “The Problem of Sociology” that was published in the United States, France, Italy, and Russia, and that made Simmel widely known in non-German

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<sup>4</sup> On these failed attempts, Otthein Rammstedt specifies that for the first attempt Simmel counted on Max Weber’s support, who later changed his mind and wrote in 1912 a letter to his brother Alfred, who was the Dean of the faculty at the moment, advising against his application. See Vernik, 2012.

academic communities. Nonetheless, in the academic ranking of Berlin University, his condition was quasi marginal with the consequences that this entailed for his way of life that had to be supported by other means<sup>5</sup>. It is important to mention the contradiction of his teaching situation at the same time that in Berlin his lectures were followed, nearly as a cult author for some people and in occasions summarized by the Sunday supplements of the newspapers; his reprobation by the university bureaucracies lowered his academic condition up to the point of completely lacking economic and political rights in the Berlin faculties. So, as soon as he could finally get a university chair elsewhere, he abandoned the great capital city and moved to Strasbourg. At the moment of his departure he allowed himself to dedicate some lines to the faculty he was leaving through an article in the newspaper that expressed his particular feeling towards so many years of humiliation, its title was eloquent: “Berlin without Simmel” (*Berlin ohne Simmel*) (Frisby, 1993: 51).

With this briefly outlined background, when Simmel received the acceptance of his professorship at the University of Strasbourg – regardless of the provincial character of this university in the backwaters of the Empire – it could have initially resulted in a reason for happiness. Finally, he achieved a position as a professor in “Philosophy and Pedagogy”, with the economic stability

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<sup>5</sup> With this, I would not want to suggest that Simmel was plainly *a marginal man*, as it is sometimes said. I do not believe this characterization would be correct for a man of such a high exposition and intervention, who actively took part in the intellectual life and that besides did not refuse the institutional instances. Let’s remember that for many years, Simmel held a strong foundational tone for the sociology he conceived and that he defended its character of an independent science in a debate that went on for decades in Germany. Thus we can place his participation since 1909 together with Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and Werner Sombart in the presidency of the first *German Society for Sociology*, which would not be a favourable activity for a marginal man.

characteristic of the *social and cultural elite*<sup>6</sup> of German professors of that time<sup>7</sup>.

The arrival in 1914 to Strasbourg, the capital city of the annexed territory of Alsace, could not have happened in a more unhappy moment. Simmel could only give one course in regular conditions; some time later war broke out close to the outskirts of the city. In his notebook, Simmel will register the sadness he felt hearing the noise of the cannons and seeing the smoke of incinerated dead people in the battlefield...<sup>8</sup>

The circumstances in which Simmel presents his *Schulpädagogik* are then those of war. At the end of 1915, the University had practically become a field hospital. Simmel takes part helping connect soldiers that came from the battlefield with their relatives<sup>9</sup>. There were no available classrooms to give lessons, but Simmel continues imparting his School Pedagogy course. He teaches in a peculiar facility of the University: the Botanical Institute. A place of relative isolation from the horror of war and of immediate proximity with Simmel's home who had only to cross the *Rue de l'Observatoire* to go through the Botanic Garden to his classroom.

As one student of that course narrated, who some years later set out to edit the notes he had taken in class, "because of the conditions of war only some students were present and some unregistered students were there too" (Karl Hauter, [1922] 2004: 313).

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<sup>6</sup> I use the expression in the sense given by Fritz Ringer (1995: 22) when he refers to German professors of that period as a "social and cultural elite that owes their status mainly to their academic qualifications instead of hereditary rights or an inherited fortune".

<sup>7</sup> Among the benefits Simmel had, the spacious and grand apartment of the *Rue de l'Observatoire* 17 and the two house servants that the University granted to its professors. (I thank professor Stefan Jonas of Strasbourg University for this information and for the hospitable tour around different places of this city significant for Simmel).

<sup>8</sup> Closing lecture, Otthein Rammstedt, in the Symposium "Actualidad del pensamiento de Simmel", Buenos Aires, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Private interview with professor Stefan Jonas of Strasbourg University.



Hauter also mentioned certain intimate aspects, as Simmel gave classes to a narrow circle of listeners, and the particular situation of an interior where time elapsed inwardly, faced to an exterior dominated by the terrible events of the time.

## 2. Philosophy and Pedagogy

We can conjecture that the course of *School pedagogy* was required to Simmel for curricular reasons given by his condition of professor of *Philosophy and Pedagogy*. If this is true, Simmel made the most of this occasion systematically expounding his guidelines on pedagogy, organized in three main thematic groups: the relations between education and teaching, the general objects of the theory of teaching and their application to specific relevant subjects such as mathematics, language, history and ethics. But he did it in a personal manner, just like he developed his work in general, offering a *sui generis* pedagogy as his sociology also is. A pedagogy that, against all passive conception of students taken as receptacles, underlines the active and particular condition of each student in a process of constant education and self-education.

A pedagogy that despite its consideration of the institutional factors, characteristic of educational institutions, allows itself some challenges regarding the teacher's authority (student and teacher share an end that transcends them: knowledge), re-signifying the sense of calling the roll (as a way of generating personal knowledge that subjectivizes the relation between the teacher and each student), or calling attention on the sense of camaraderie and solidarity among students that "pass answers" during a written exam. But more substantially than the latter, it comprises a pedagogy conceived as the art of educating, learning and teaching in a framework of hermeneutic idealism that privileges the creative and cultural conditions of an autonomous subject in his process of endless education and self-education throughout his life.

Therefore, as a pedagogue, Simmel develops one by one the topics of his sociological and philosophical capital to refer them to

considerations of the art of teaching and educating. This is explicit, for example, in the specific class about history. There he applies his knowledge in the pedagogical field in the way it appears in his book *Problems of the Philosophy of History* (Simmel, [1907] 1950). Here, he insists in his critique to naïve historicism, underlining the activity of the subjective spirit to model the empirical matter of historical facts. Or also in his class about ethics in which he points out, as a critique to the mechanism of Kantian origin, the need to value the moments that give unity to the specificity of a life transmuting the quest for a universal law into an individual law, analogously to how this appears in the last chapter of *The View of Life (Lebensanschauung)* (Simmel, 1999b).

Before looking in more detail into Simmel's exposition on pedagogy, it will be useful to outline – even if it is in a brief and schematic way – three core conceptions present throughout his previous works, on which he bases some notions that structure his pedagogy. I believe adequate to refer to the following three key concepts in the theory of Simmel: 1) Fragmentation, 2) Experience (*Erlebnis*), and 3) Freedom. Through these three concepts, we can aim to matters that are supported by the *Schulpädagogik*.

In the first place, he closely relates the fragmentary condition of modern experience to the problem of the death of God and the loss of absolute truths. This scenario has led to the characterization of modernity as a situation where the fragmentary and the relative are paramount. In this sense, Simmel's diagnosis finds in money the symbol of modernity, because it is what can be infinitely fragmented without losing its essence, and also the most relative thing that exists (for this, it is valid the question, impossible to answer, that Simmel (1994: 120) posed: “How much is much money?”). But money has the alienating quality of transforming from a means in origin into – in a modern context – an end in itself. In this way, there is a transmutation from means to ends, whose alienated sense is expressed in the pre-eminence of fragmented means at the expense of substantive ends. The modern conscience is left in the means that

are unlimitedly reproduced, losing the horizon of the essential means that give sense to life.

Regarding cultural production, according to the famous Simmelian formulation of the *tragedy of culture*, there would be a discrepancy between the reproduction of cultural goods and the capacity of subjective appropriation during a limited life.

Against these fragmentary forms of modern knowledge, we see in *School Pedagogy* that Simmel is preoccupied about reintegrating the idea of totality to the transmission and production of knowledge. Against the idea of knowledge as an end in itself, Simmel will insist in subsuming it to its condition of a means for the ultimate end of pedagogy, understood as the integral education of the individual (Simmel, 2004: 428).

In the second conceptual perspective, on the concept of *Erlebnis*, that Simmel uses in his pedagogical exposition and in previous texts, such as the essay on “The adventure” (Simmel, [1911] 1988: 11-26), its meaning refers in the first place, to the radicalization of life in an instant. In this sense, the concept of *Erlebnis* expresses the experience of immediacy that distances from the modern process of fragmentation and mediatization. *Erlebnis* appears as a vital moment in which, for an instant, we feel the totality of life. It is a kind of vital sovereign islet that splits from the *continuum* of life, provoking a present time beyond past and future.

Simmel refers to different *Erlebnisse* in different books, as the aesthetic or erotic experience, or in more particular cases to those that are characteristic of adventure or playing. We can also now see a type of pedagogic *Erlebnis* that happens now and then in extraordinary situations while teaching a class, in which, for an instant, the comprehension horizon of the teacher and his audience fuses.

Finally, to refer briefly to a capital concept in Simmel, freedom, in one of its considerations, is always relative. There are degrees of freedom, but never absolute freedom in an empirical context. Because once freedom is found, it is challenged by new surfacing

horizons of this same freedom. In this sense, freedom – according to the metaphor of his famous essay “Bridge and door” (Simmel, [1909] 2001: 55-61) – is to draw bridges between two shores to continue the path until we find new challenges. In another of its dimensions, freedom is defined – not without a certain degree of metaphysics – as the possibility of “externalizing what one internally is”. In this sense, freedom is a form of individuality.

These two dimensions of the concept of freedom appear in the pedagogical discourse of Simmel. We see, in analogy to the problem of knowledge, that freedom is solving obstacles only to find new ones, to overflow that which is delimited, to face new limits. And the freedom of knowledge leads to conceive pedagogy as the education and self-education of the subject, which will not be accomplished without heeding to the particular constellation of each individual.

After these theoretical considerations, it is time to go back to the *Schulpädagogik* to examine some of its main practical formulations.

### 3. Pedagogy as a specific practice and as life

*Non scholae, sed vitae discimus*<sup>10</sup>.

Seneca, quoted by Simmel  
(2004: 342).

The course that Simmel teaches in Strasbourg in 1915-16 is explicitly oriented to the practical training of young pedagogues. His incitements to praxis, to a theory and a practice oriented to the actual craft, are ideas that – according to the author – are very difficult to communicate to already trained professors.

In contrast with other Simmel’s interventions, he orients the aim of these classes less to the theoretical analysis than to the concrete doing, to the *pedagogical praxis*. And from the beginning, he clarifies

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<sup>10</sup> *We do not learn for school, but for life.*

that he does not expect specialists in pedagogy to come out of his lessons, but pedagogues. The course is explicitly aimed to “the problems of everyday work as pedagogues”, in particular to schoolteachers, but throughout his exposition, we can find broader elements on the art of educating and teaching that concern all of us who teach. Although, as I will point out later, according to one dimension of Simmel’s pedagogy, a categorical line dividing pedagogues from the rest of the people would not exist except for their professional adscription.

Our approximation to the lessons of the *Schulpädagogik* is through the book compiled by Karl Heuter which gathers the contents of these lessons, nearly without editing, in the sense they appear almost literally as they were uttered. It sounds as Simmel himself is talking in front of the students as if he was writing or, before that, thinking and rethinking about the contents he is imparting. Hence one can observe a *thought in progress*, unpolished ideas that seem to be said at the same time their author corroborated them. As Heuter says remembering Simmel’s attitude in these classes: “He was so dominated by thoughts that in the very instant they seemed to be produced and penetrate from immediate life” (Heuter, 2004: 313).

The valuation of the class as a productive space of knowledge formation is also found in the narratives of other courses that give testimony that Simmel imparted his lessons with a pencil in his hand and that he concentrated in making his thoughts emerge from the class situation itself (Waizbort, 2000: 578). The space of the class as a *form* of thought appears singularly remembered by many of those who went through his different courses, university students and the *very private* ones that had a place in the salon of his home in Berlin<sup>11</sup>; nevertheless it is time already to refer to the main contents of this course on the art of pedagogy.

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<sup>11</sup> A group of memorable testimonies on Simmel’s classes and his sharp teaching quality appear in the great homage book to Simmel when celebrating a hundred years of his birth prepared by K. Gasen and M. Landmann (1958).

The opening class – that will then appear as the introduction to the book – begins with a treatise about pedagogy that he considers more art than science. And if this book clearly stands out from the rest of his titles because of the prose, less allegorical than in other interventions, it shares with many of them this introductory treatise on the specific scientific character of his productions. The *Schulpädagogik* begins with a reflection about the scientific nature of his discourse (Simmel, 2004: 317) analogous to the one we find, for example, in the *Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, [1900] 1989: 9) or in the *great* (Simmel, [1908] 1992: 13) and in the *small Sociology* (Simmel, [1917] 1999a: 62) or in the *Rembrandt* (Simmel, [1916] 1996: 1) What a science of society is, what a science of art is, what a science of pedagogy is. In every case, the resolutions adopted by Simmel have different shades, but they show Simmel's concerns about the scientific question that was never alien to him. It is convenient to point this out because many times when the impressionist character of the author is highlighted, he is wrongly presented as someone who neglects the problem of science. Of course his conception of the scientific nature is not based on the parameters of positive science, but on a version close to the sciences of spirit, of hermeneutical roots, and oriented in every case – though with different nuances that are accentuated nearing the end of his life – towards the philosophies of life. But the question of the nature of science as a problem of knowledge is constant throughout his works. Here, Simmel recognizes the value of the science of pedagogy, he even examines and discusses some of its theories – for example, the ones of Herbert or Pestalozzi – but he analyses them as a basis at the service of pedagogical practice, of the everyday work of teachers in front of students. This is the core question of these lessons: the intervention on actual ways of educating and teaching.

It can be said there are three tasks that Simmel proposes for teachers' activity. In the first place, providing students with objective knowledge, then, educating the student to develop his own possibilities that will deal with cultivating his person. But between both, there is a third that produces a tension between the

other two: teaching to do, to be able to do (*können machen*) (Simmel, 2004: 328). Therefore, the capacity of doing is the ultimate task of education. This is neither a knowledge nor a being but a being educated through knowledge towards the capacity of doing.

This is the way Simmel presents the tasks of practical and vitalistic pedagogy. It is a practical pedagogy because it is conceived to have effects on actual teaching practices; in this sense, it is aimed in the first place to all of us who teach in our professional lives. And it is a vitalistic pedagogy because it is about “*education as life*”. Understanding education as a process that never ends while there is life and that makes up a particular dimension in the individual existence, Simmel visualizes an essential relation between pedagogy and life he expresses in the introduction to his course: “I won’t be afraid of directing my gaze to the ultimate principles of the different territories of life and knowledge, as long as they are in a clear pedagogical relation” (Simmel, 2004: 318).

Hence, with his thought about flow, against the rigidities of mechanism and intellectualism, Simmel states that pedagogy should be something alive whose contents should not be solidified; on the contrary, they should follow the pace of life, of the teacher and of the students. And besides, in a less abstract sphere, he speaks out for complementing the school contents with contents from out of school, those that come from everyday life.

As in previous interventions Simmel will use the categories of *form* and *content* in the internal structuration of the pedagogical discourse that shapes his thought in a broader way. This distinction, as an analytical point of view on the field of pedagogy, allows Simmel to separate the performance or result of teaching (which is the content), and the process of work of the student (that is its form). And, of course, Simmel calls teachers to privilege the *form* of pedagogy over the teaching *contents*. But, rather than neglecting the latter, Simmel asks a double pedagogical question: what should students learn? (in relation to *contents*), and how should it be? (its *form*).

Likewise, Simmel uses the same abstraction to locate other comparisons such as *teaching contents* versus *education of the entire man*, or in other passages, the *organization of the school machinery* versus *education of the entire man*. In these cases, it is also important to consider that although the objective performance is important, it should not be the goal of education which is the integral education of the entire man.

The insistence in the *form*, as a *process* of teaching and learning, will be a constant of the *Schulpädagogik*. Thus, Simmel will uphold throughout his course that such process of education of the student – and later in the self-education of the person – continues in and out of the classroom. Consequently, he confers an always incomplete character – *in progress* – on education, that is unending. This last point requires understanding that the process of education/self-education never ends while there is life. Simmel says, evoking Goethe: “Education should ‘educate’ the student to continue as self-education, self-formation” (Simmel, 2004: 342).

He combines the image of a germinal education that develops into the self-education of the restless spirit that travels, characteristic of the Goethian pantheism, with the quest for a group of fundamental questions to be unravelled throughout the path of life.

As in other works of the same period: his books about *Goethe* (Simmel, [1913] 1949) and *Rembrandt* (Simmel, [1916] 1996), the essays gathered in the *The View of Life* (Simmel, [1918] 1999b: 209-425), and also in the *School Pedagogy*, the distinction between *form* and *content* gives way to *life* and *form*. We can see that the main polarities of the philosophy of life that Simmel used to unfold, such as, *life* versus *form*, *soul* versus *form*, or *subjective culture* versus *objective culture*, are reworked and appear here applied to the specific field of pedagogy: the education of men versus teaching material, life versus objective spirit, integral education of men versus school machinery organization... “The relation between teaching material and the education of men to be produced by pedagogy should be presented as the relation between objective spirit and life” (Simmel, 2004: 334).



Explicitly based on the formulation of the tragedy of culture, the hypertrophy of the culture of things and the atrophy of the activity of subjects; Simmelian education aims to stimulate the activity of students, against the currents that see students as a mere receptacle of an objectivized knowledge. This pedagogy that Simmel exposes in his moment of higher commitment with the current of the philosophies of life, shares with other interventions of this period his critique to intellectualism and dogmatic mechanism of Kantian origin.

The first of these critiques persistently appears. For example, faced with the verification of the growing proliferation of different contents in the curriculum, Simmel recommends working “against the intellectualist overload that youngsters usually believe they could wholly understand. To point out, rarely but clearly, the limits of our knowledge and understanding” (Simmel, 2004: 371).

The critique of the mechanization of teaching is also constant throughout these lessons. There is a persistent call to overcome the atomized and mechanized character of the most usual practices of pedagogy. In some occasions, he refers to atomization and monotony as the main enemies of attention in class. Furthermore, after complaining about the growing atomization of the different disciplines that are taught in schools (“it is unbearable”) (Simmel, 2004: 350), Simmel considers this characteristic as opposed to what the ultimate end of education should be, which is the general education of the person. In a more concrete way, referring to the specific case of the teaching of history, Simmel calls attention to the need for presenting it articulated as a unity. The contrary is atomized history, “of isolated parts” that provides the strongest boost towards mechanization and endless subdivision (Simmel, 2004: 442).

In conclusion, Simmel advocates for a creative, eager type of teacher opposed to the routines of intellectualization and mechanization and capable of subsuming his own condition for the sake of the self-taught ideal. He explicitly postulates this when he

points out: “The goal of the educator is making himself dispensable” (Simmel, 2004: 342).

The teacher will know through tact and talent when to step aside. The student will ask the appropriate questions and will follow his own path. Here Simmel also introduces the principle of the predominance of the forms in pedagogy to postulate that questions (as *forms*) are more important than answers (as *their contents*). This will be another of the mottos that Simmel formulates to young pedagogues: the answers to our questions are important, but more important are questions. Thus we read in the *School Pedagogy*: “It is not the target that gives value to the path but the path as unity is valuable” (Simmel, 2004: 324). And this same pre-eminence of the paths over the goals appeared in previous interventions. Aphoristically, he had declared in 1906: “I like paths without finishing lines and finishing lines without paths” (Simmel, 1998: 100). And in an allegorical-metaphysical way he had put the same idea as a beginning of his essays collection of 1911: the fable of the peasant that before dying gathered his children to confess that he had buried a treasure in the sown field... his children ploughed the soil but couldn’t find the treasure,

But the next crop is three times bigger with the soil ploughed in this way. A good symbol for the line we draw to metaphysics. We will not find the treasure but the world, ploughed by us, will be three times more fruitful for the spirit (Simmel, [1911] 1988: 9).

For Simmel, this is one of the ultimate aims of his speculations: the unceasing search of new forms. Allegorically it results more important the process of digging that the contents of the finding. And Simmel has addressed the pedagogues gathered in the Botanic Institute of Strasbourg in the same terms: more important than answers are questions “The answer must precede the question” (Simmel, 2004: 394).

#### **4. Last reflections**

Indeed, we have seen Simmel stress in this intervention the actual practices of pedagogues in front of a class. Nevertheless, we have pointed out too that he does not exclusively orient his considerations to those that make – as most of us – a profession of the art of giving lessons, but that they embrace a permanent condition of life, which is teaching and learning.

We said that Simmel considers pedagogy more an art than a science. This is the reason he advocates for the truth of the usual expression, “the art of pedagogy”. And as we have noted for other dimensions of his exposition, we also find here a consonance with other texts of the same period. Like in *The View of life* (*Lebensanschauung*), in the *School Pedagogy* Simmel contemplates the relation between art and life, the existential character of the artist as of the pedagogue. Thus, he affirms, “we all are pre-existent artists, poets or musicians” (Simmel, [1918] 2002: 62). And just as Simmel considers music to be an essential condition of human existence – therefore we all are pre-existentialist musicians, in the sense that music is part of life, that some cultivate more and others less – the same is said by Simmel in relation to pedagogy: teaching and learning are natural to the life of people: “We all are pre-existentialist pedagogues” (Ibid.).

Pedagogy has an “organic”, “natural”, “essential” (to use a term that for many people can sound problematic) bond with the person and with their own idea of education (*Bildung*). It relates the existential character of pedagogy to education and self-education of men, with –to insist on a Simmelian lexicon – his cultivation and self-cultivation throughout his life, in the process “of perfecting individuals” (Simmel, [1911] 1988: 232) The aim of pedagogy is to form a self-realized subject, which requires that in some moment the subject becomes independent from the pedagogue. The subject passes to his process of self-education in which as in real life, curiosity for new things, for that that has never been listened presents itself as a horizon-guide...

## Coda

Allow me to finish by drawing attention to a group of practical propositions that arise from the *Schulpädagogik* and that we can keep for our practices as a kind of small Simmelian manifesto on pedagogy.

***Conceiving the class as a whole.*** To consider the contents of the class as a unity and at the same time in continuity with the next class.

For the first of these two considerations, it is necessary not to tear the class apart in pieces (Simmel, 2004: 360). We should attempt to present each class as an autonomous existence, with a beginning, a knot and an ending.

For the second consideration, we create expectations...

**2. *Rousing the attention of students.*** The success of each class depends on students paying attention. Because without a certain degree of attentiveness there is no class, “only a teacher’s monologue” (Simmel, 2004: 361). Atomization and monotony are the common enemies of expectation and therefore, of attention.

**3. *Transmitting our own interest.*** To awaken in students the mood that corresponds to the object of study in each case. But for this end it is necessary for the teacher himself to feel it, otherwise, everything is in vain. It is capital, within the margins of the curriculum, for the teacher to propose “those special tasks worth of his personal interest” (Simmel, 2004: 349).

**4. *Against fragmentation, articulate contents.*** Conceiving as an ultimate end of teaching the integral education of the person. Take a stance against the fragmentation of knowledge growingly caused by the atomization of disciplines (Simmel, 2004: 350).

It is not about abolishing different disciplines or teaching topics, but to plan forms of articulation among them to present students with the totality of the great tasks.

**5. *Naming the students in favour of personalities.*** The teacher will try, as soon as it is possible, to gain a figure of the entire personality of the student, hence as soon as it is possible he should

have in his head the name of each student; knowing the students and looking them in the eyes. Observe them, but not monitor them.

Calling the students by their names – instead of questioning them through the use of “you” – is more influencing and questions the personality in a deeper sense (Simmel, 2004: 351).

**6. *Against routines.*** He declares against the routines that solidify a vitality that has always to be the condition of the process of education. Pedagogy cannot lack mysteries or adventures. To present the same material for forty years in a row, or slightly changed, not only leads to a solidified and pedagogically ineffective practice but it ruins the person of the teacher and of his students (Simmel, 2004: 353).

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