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EPISTEMOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY RE-EXAMINED. THE UNSUSPECTED POTENTIAL OF JOHN ELLIOTT'S «LIBERAL» PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHING CONTENT-GOALS IN THE SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES

La pedagogía y la epistemología sometidas a examen. El inesperado potencial de la pedagogía «liberal» de John Elliott para la enseñanza de contenidos en las ciencias sociales y humanas

Épistémologie et pédagogie réexaminée. Le potentiel insoupçonnée de la pédagogie «libéral» de John Elliott pour l'enseignement de contenu en sciences sociales et humaines

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RESUMEN

En un intento por analizar en profundidad la contribución de John Elliott al campo de los estudios curriculares, el siguiente artículo comienza situando el trabajo

de este pedagogo en el contexto de los debates ideológicos fundamentales del siglo XX, cuyas consecuencias determinaron el campo de las ciencias humanas y sociales. El posicionamiento de Elliott en esta encrucijada ideológica se define como «liberal», a causa de la manera en la que conectó su propia filosofía de la educación con la esfera de la ética y de los medios de la educación, en oposición a perspectivas finalistas de la educación, como la consolidación de conocimientos objetivos. La segunda parte de este trabajo explora la pedagogía de Elliott desde el punto de vista del potencial que ésta pueda tener para sugerir un enfoque curricular que, en contra de su propia perspectiva, defienda la objetividad de las ciencias sociales y humanas, así como la necesidad de que los estudiantes aprendan ciertos contenidos. En contraste con las intenciones del propio Elliott, el artículo llega a la conclusión de que el hecho de que los estudiantes participen en la misma realidad social que deben llegar a comprender, plantea obstáculos pedagógicos (emocionales y de interacción), de cara a cuya superación los principios de Elliott se revelarían particularmente efectivos.

Palabras clave: pedagogía; epistemología; currículo; conocimiento; medios; contenidos.

SUMMARY

In an attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of John Elliott's prolonged contribution to the field of educational and curricular studies, the following paper starts by locating this pedagogue's work in the context of key ideological debates of the 20th century, whose consequences shaped the realm of the social and the human sciences. Elliott's stand at this ideological crossroads is defined as *liberal*, on account of the way he tied his own educational philosophy to the ethical sphere and to the *means* of education, in opposition to the learning of objective knowledge. The second part of the paper explores Elliott's pedagogy from the point of view of the potential it may have to suggest a curricular approach that, contrary to his, defends the objectivity of the social and human sciences and the need for students to fulfil and attain certain content-goals. In contrast to Elliott's intentions, the paper arrives at the conclusion that the fact that students participate in the same social reality they must come to understand and obtain a knowledge of, poses specific pedagogical (emotional and interactional) obstacles that Elliott's principles would be particularly well suited to overcome.

Key words: pedagogy; epistemology; knowledge; curriculum; means; content-goals.

SOMMAIRE

Dans une tentative d'analyser en profondeur la contribution de John Elliott dans le domaine de l'étude du curriculum, l'article replace s'œuvre dans le contexte des débats idéologiques fondamentales du XXe siècle, les conséquences déterminées les sciences humaines et social. Le positionnement d'Elliott dans

ce carrefour idéologique est défini comme «libéral», en raison de la façon dont il a frappé sa propre philosophie de l'éducation dans le domaine de l'éthique et les moyens de l'éducation, par opposition aux perspectives finalistes de l'éducation comme consistant d'objectifs d'acquisition de connaissances. La deuxième partie de cet article explore la pédagogie d'Elliott, du point de vue du potentiel qu'elle pourrait avoir à proposer une approche curriculaire, contre son propre point de vue, défendre l'objectivité des sciences sociales et humaines, et de la nécessité que les élèves apprennent à certains contenus. Contrairement aux intentions d'Elliott, l'article conclut que le fait que les élèves participent à la même réalité sociale qui doit arriver à comprendre, soulève des obstacles pédagogiques (émotionnel et interaction), en face de dépassement principes d'Elliott révèlent particulièrement efficaces.

Mots clés: pédagogie; épistémologie; curriculum; connaissances; médias; contenu.

1. Introducing the socio-historical context of John Elliott's pedagogy

The recent publication of John Elliott's selected works by Routledge World Library of Educationalists series (Elliott, 2007) calls for a re-analysis of this pedagogue's message in the light of the 30-year long context of the main facts and ideas that shaped it. From the early 1970s to the beginning of this new century, the world has undergone important material and ideological transformations that I believe can be pinpointed in Elliott's writings. This is the main goal of this paper. At the outset, I find it convenient to echo the way Elliott himself speaks about his own contribution – something he frequently does –; for example, the tone he adopts when speaking about the difficulties encountered in his career; or the way he spoke (as early as the 1980s) of teachers having lost a pedagogical battle which he was still fighting, from his post at the University of East Anglia. The nature of this defeat (which according to him also involved a lost opportunity) relates to the Education Reforms implemented in England from the mid-1970s onwards. These reforms, he argues, only made things worse. Labour and Conservative parties alike ended up turning a decentralized, discovery-oriented curriculum, which still afforded educators opportunities to innovate, into a centralized, top-down, pedagogically-conservative, and exam– and content-oriented one in which the only strategies for teacher-accountability and educational assessment had to do with students taking standardized exams (Elliott, 1998, 20-34). Henceforward, «teaching to tests» would inevitably become a dominant methodology in the UK, the USA and the rest of Europe (Elliott, 2007, 65-80). According to Elliott, education thus conceived actualized an ongoing *social-engineering project*.

Among other possible theoretical approaches, I believe the difference between means and ends in the social sphere (and the question regarding which one should gain prevalence over the other) provides an enlightening standpoint to contrast the two pedagogical models just mentioned: namely, Elliott's

procedural one vs. the dominant objectives-model. The means and ends dilemma recurs every now and then in the sphere of the social sciences, whatever the field of studies involved and whatever its specific purposes (Weber, 2004; Adorno and Horkheimer, 2007; Rawls, 1971; Habermas, 1984); the ample scope of phenomena gathered within Educational studies poses no exception to this norm. In the specific field of Pedagogy, for instance, the means/ends dialectic stands out as an essential issue in itself, not only to distinguish between a procedural curriculum (such as Elliott's) and an objectivist one (such as successive governments gradually implemented), but also when discussing John Elliott's work, since he deals with this opposition every time he seeks to emphasize the most innovative points of his own proposal.

Regarding this means and ends dialectic, Elliott's stand is unambiguous: The way things are taught (a dimension traditionally considered as the means of education) is more important than the things taught (traditionally considered as its ends). In other words: in relation to the general aims of education, the characteristics of the learning process pupils undergo is far more significant than the contents they should learn through it, in the natural, the human or the social sciences. This outlook has a direct antecedent and indeed Elliott has never tired of acknowledging that it was under Lawrence Stenhouse's (1970) pioneering influence that he came to subvert the traditional schema through which pedagogy had traditionally defined education and ended up presenting his own alternative.

I will dwell longer on this pedagogic transformation during the next sections of the paper, but before doing so a historical factor should be briefly brought to the fore. Elliott's pedagogical design was further conditioned by the influence of wider historical and cultural inertias that went beyond England's context; these must be recognized for his pedagogy to be correctly located in the ideological frame in which it belongs and, furthermore, to diagnose some of the present problems of education. I am referring to the triumph of economic liberalism and of its corresponding ideologies by the end of the 20th century. Today Education develops tendencies that underlay the Cold War but which the latter's end did not successfully resolve; victorious liberalism, which has become in the meantime the world's dominant ideology, pervades every single sphere and sub-sphere in society. My claim, in this regard, is that at the theoretical core of this ideological block one can find two ideas which also work as defining traits in Elliott's pedagogy; these consist of [1] a strong criticism of the separation between scientific and non-scientific cultural manifestations, and [2] a corresponding emphasis on the ethical dimension of human nature. This general coincidence would already justify a detailed exploration concerning the possibility of defining Elliott as a liberal pedagogue, such as this article partially intends to fulfil.

Undoubtedly, the individual authors and philosophical schools of thought that contributed to crystallizing each of these two powerful ideological inertias are too many to be mentioned in a single article. Still, we can summon up some references which surely qualify as significant influences; for instance, as regards the first

liberal feature – the blurring of the difference between scientific and non-scientific forms of thought –, one must bear in mind that American pragmatism, Kierkegaardian existentialism, and members of the Frankfurt School were sceptical of starkly drawing such distinctions. The re-enactment of Nietzsche's thought during the 20th century, including his abandonment of the long-standing difference between objective or subjective expressions of human culture, surely encouraged this tendency too; as did the concept of narrative (White, 1978) play an important role, especially, though not exclusively, in the realm of the social and human sciences, which underwent a deep transformation in its frame and scope. Inter – and cross – disciplinarity, eclecticism, the mingling of the social and the human studies, of technology and science, the promotion of minority worldviews into the academic arena (Banks, 1995; Gontarczyk-Wesola, 1995), all these novel tendencies were made possible by this underlying trend, which ended up having profound and interesting effects on the pedagogic dimension of the social sciences (Wagner *et al.*, 2011; Biesta, 2011; Cruickshank, 2010). In the end, it also determined the general understanding of scientific rationality. Philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, for example, who lectured at Berkeley College (California) for several stints in his lifetime, affirmed that

> science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without ever having examined its advantages and its limits (Feyerabend, 1975, 295).

The second liberal trait – a growing emphasis on the ethical dimension of human nature – was particularly favoured by the abovementioned belief that the separation between scientific and non-scientific cultural manifestations was partially unfounded. This led to the corresponding belief that ethics – no longer scientific reason – was the most defining characteristic of human-beingness. Among the dominant cultural manifestation of this position was *humanism*, a philosophical paradigm which, through various advocates, remained fashionable in Western Europe (even in the USSR) during the late 50s and the 1960s. Likewise, although his philosophy cannot be entirely assimilated to humanism, I find it hard not to associate the frequent claim that Martin Heidegger remains the most influential 20th century philosopher with the fact that the same shift of emphasis, from science to ethics, can be found in his work (Heidegger, 1993, 213-265). Affirmations such as that «the essence of technology, as destining of revealing, is the danger» (333) were accompanied by ethical explorations that bordered on artistic creation, and which made him largely responsible for the pre-eminence of this frame of thought.

There is one last issue I would like to dwell on before leaving behind this introductory section and directly develop my argument concerning Elliott's

pedagogy. The two liberal traits I am describing clearly characterize what the social and human sciences commonly understand by the name of *postmodernism* (Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1990). Perhaps this term has already lost much of its original meaning and precision, but in my opinion it still needs to be addressed when one approaches John Elliott's pedagogy, which remained somewhat ambivalent towards it. Whilst it is commonly agreed that postmodernism reached its ideological climax in the early 1980s, by that date Elliott had already gone through the key educational experiences that would end up shaping his own pedagogical proposal for good (Elliott, 1991, 1998). However, when the opportunity came, he assumed openly some of the traits of the postmodern condition. For instance, he justified some of his own educational proposals by saying that «within our postmodern culture we now tend to experience all knowledge as uncertain and unstable, as provisional and open to revision. … it is now increasingly clear from historical and philosophical enquiry into the nature of scientific discovery, that the positivist account of science which has underpinned the development of science education in school is now culturally, if not politically, obsolete» (Elliott, 1998, 29). Similarly, Stenhouse's unwillingness to distinguish between facts and values in the social and human sciences advanced in the same direction (Elliott, 2007, 21).

I would like to focus on Elliott's suggestion, however, since the concepts introduced therein will become instrumental for presenting my arguments later on, and it is convenient that we take some time to deal carefully with them. Henceforward I will refer to that 1998 quote as containing the basic, underlying epistemological principle of Elliott's pedagogy. The essential idea is that the fields of epistemology and pedagogy need to be distinguished, even if they are connected logically. The Merriam-Webster dictionary, for example, defines the former as «the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity»; on the other hand, it explains the latter as «the art, science, or profession of teaching». While epistemology deals with the conditions under which new factual knowledge is possible, pedagogy seems interested in the conditions whereby one can teach knowledge that has already been discovered. Also, from Elliott's words we may conclude that, even though he sometimes adopted an unsympathetic tone towards postmodernism, and despite the fact that he was criticized on these grounds by more radical postmodern thinkers, I am afraid superficial differences such as his consideration of theory and practice (Elliott, 2007, 205-206) prevented him and his critics from identifying the obvious elements they had in common. Surely, postmodernism radicalized the main trait that this introduction has identified in liberal epistemology, and knowingly or unknowingly, it strongly influenced Elliott's approach, as it did with other educationists.

2. John Elliott's liberal pedagogy

Elliott adopted some key tenets of liberalism and projected them onto his educational theory and practice. As a result, I believe many of his pedagogical claims

could be justified consistently from the angle of liberalism. Let us focus on the question regarding the means and ends of education. The following extracts from Elliott present action research as the backbone of his pedagogical project, and they will surely illustrate my point:

> The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and utilization of knowledge is subordinated to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim.
>
> The improvement of a practice consists of realizing those values which constitute its ends, e.g. «justice» for legal practice, «patient care» for medicine, «preserving peace» for policing, «education» for teaching. Such ends are not simply manifested in the outcomes of a practice. They are also manifested as intrinsic qualities of the practice themselves (Elliott, 1991, 49).
>
> Action research might be defined as «the Study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of the action within in». It aims to feed practical judgment in concrete situations, and the validity of the «theories» or «hypothesis» it generates depends not so much on «scientific» tests of truth, as on their usefulness in helping people to act more intelligently and skillfully. In action research «theories» are not validated independently and then applied to practice. They are validated through practice (Elliott, 1991, 69).

By *objective knowledge*, this paper understands an individual's acquaintance with cultural expressions that faithfully represent material, factual processes. The *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) defines knowledge as «justified true belief», and I take this objective quality to derive from direct or indirect contrast with factual processes. Not only does this understanding differ in essential ways from the liberal view on knowledge (more tolerant and lenient with individuals' claims to truth, regardless of whether these were well- or ill-founded, in keeping or at odds with scientific forms of thought and rationality), but also from Elliott's own, which makes no reference either to the material dimension or to experimental methodology, but relies mostly on inter-subjectivity (being open to other's judgments and ideas) as the best way to reach objectivity (Elliott, 1991, 102-103 and 115-117). In keeping with his perspective, according to the first quote, objective knowledge remains separate from the ends that characterize several important social practices such as justice, patient care, or politics. My opinion is that one could expect knowledge not to appear as the goal of every single one of these practices, but not the fact that knowledge was kept completely disconnected from their fulfilment. This sounds too unequivocal a claim. I find it likewise difficult to picture how a theory that proves useful in helping people to act more intelligently and with greater skills could, again, remain *completely* unrelated to any form of scientific knowledge. According to the main trends in philosophy of science, experimentation (one of the principles defining scientific rationality) is actually not that different from what the previous paragraph describes as «validation through practice». However, one gets the opposite idea from reading these extracts, an impression

further strengthened as the first one continues and Elliott gets more specific about the nature of *education*, which he regards as the veritable end of teaching. He describes it in terms of «openness to questions, ideas and ways of thinking»; «commitment to free and open discussion»; «respect for evidence»; «concern to foster independent thinking and an interest in the subject matter», etc. (49-50). Many of the common features that political liberalism associates with critical citizenship – and which Elliott fosters in his own pedagogy (2007, 122) – are alluded to in the previous list of terms describing education, but objective knowledge receives no mention whatsoever. A similar perspective is adopted in the following paragraph, written nearly a decade before.

> Conceptions of educational ends refer to ideals, values, and principles, to be realized *in* the way teachers proceed to relate pupils to the content of education and not to the extrinsic outcomes of this process. *Educational* ends constitute intrinsic criteria for judging what is to count as a worthwhile *educational process* (Elliott, 2007, 19).

It seems obvious to me that, throughout Elliott's essays, the eventuality of students' actually learning new objective knowledge through the educational process is regarded as an extrinsic outcome of education, not as the latter's primary end, even more so in the social and human sciences curriculum. Herein lies Elliott's subversion of the means/ends traditional schema, i.e. precisely in the way the ends of education are realized in the means themselves and not by students learning a set of definite contents at the end of the educational process, as the dominant, objectives-model curriculum sustains. According to Elliott, the latter «remained trapped in an "objectivist" theory of understanding» (2007, 17). In contrast, he finds it necessary that «the ethical [be] projected into a realm of ends which can be defined independently of and prior to practice» (1991, 52); «Ends», according to Stenhouse, «cannot be specified independently of the means of realizing them» (1998, 108-109). The origin of this ethical perspective is allegedly attributed also to R. S. Peter, for whom «conceptions of educational ends refer to ideals, values, and principles, to be realized *in* the way teachers proceed to relate pupils to the content of education and not to the extrinsic outcomes of this process» (2007, 19).

These statements lead logically to two different set of questions that I will tackle from now to the end of the paper: 1. To what extent is Elliott's pedagogical transformation theoretically dependent and reliant on the postmodernist epistemology we have described?; 2. Is it logically necessary – and even desirable – that they should come together? What could happen, pedagogically speaking, if they did not?

In the process of answering these questions, I will also try to present a basic innovation concerning an unexpected potential I find in Elliott's pedagogy for social and human sciences education.

Regarding the first problem, and bearing in mind the evidence provided by Elliott himself, one must conclude that the latter's pedagogical shift from an

objectives model to a *process model curriculum* was dependent on, if not a direct result of, the series of epistemological claims we have already associated with liberal thought. I am referring to ideas such as the scientific domain consisting of provisional knowledge (an idea that goes against Kuhn's *irreversibility principle of scientific knowledge* [Kuhn, 1970, 206]), to Elliott's earlier insistence on the obsolescence of the traditional trust in the scientific method (Elliott, 1998, 29), or Elliott and Stenhouse's implicit support of Feyerabend's and Lyotard's theses according to which there is no clear difference between scientific and non-scientific knowledge. Of course, the main pedagogical consequence stemming from Elliott's decision to build his approach on this relativistic epistemology is that, having downgraded to such an extent the educational role of objective knowledge and the possible advantages (both individual and social) that students could derive from it, the only worth Elliott and Stenhouse could possibly attribute to their own pedagogical proposal was *ethical* in kind. We have seen that this is exactly what happens. Elliott's articles increasingly interact with the sphere of ethics and practical philosophy, since it was there, in that realm, where he expected to find further justification for his model of action research, especially when he started to interpret it as a *praxiology* (Elliott, 2007, 17-18). This explains his frequent references to phronetic philosophers such as Aristotle (19, 22, 106-108), Gadamer (105-106), Hannah Arendt, and of course Heidegger. In doing so, not only did he stand at odds with Stenhouse's suggestion that action research required no additional theoretical base that was extrinsic to the immediate educational context, but one finds it increasingly difficult not to conclude that the only quality teachers should pursue in the educational process is ethical in nature, and that it consists solely in actualizing a set of *liberal values* inside the classroom. In other words, one gets the impression that the values implemented by Elliott's pedagogy are identical with those upon which a liberal democracy is presumably founded (1998, 32).

And again, this is exactly what we find. In order for teachers to satisfy Elliott's set of goals, they had to remain loyal to liberal values such as «openness», «tolerance», «respect», «freedom» and «critical awareness», something they would accomplish by applying a precise set of practical principles that embodied those values and gave them a concrete translation in the context of the classroom. The teacher's task was thus characterized «not by defining learning objectives and targets for pupils in relation to a curriculum conceived as an objective text, but by adopting "principles of procedure" for handling cultural content in classrooms» (1998, 109). These principles recur time and again throughout Elliott's work, but they were first laid out in the Humanities Project put forward by Lawrence Stenhouse, in the late 1960s. «The project's official handbook», writes Elliott, «asserts the following principles:»

1. That controversial issues should be handled in the classroom with adolescents;
2. That the teacher accepts the need to submit his teaching in controversial areas to the criterion of neutrality at this stage of education, i.e. that he regards it as part of his responsibility not to promote his own view;

3. That the mode of enquiry in controversial areas should have discussion, rather than instruction, as its core;
4. That the discussion should protect divergence of view among participants, rather than attempt to achieve consensus;
5. That the teacher as chairman of the discussion should have responsibility for quality and standards in learning (Elliott, 2007, 22; 1991, 16).

A large part of Elliott's work was devoted to justifying the claim that these principles realized the veritable goals of teaching; but he dedicated as much to devising and putting into practice pedagogic and institutional strategies that helped teachers understand these principles properly and be able to implement them, as was mentioned among the goals of the Humanities (Elliott, 2007, 15-29) and the Ford Project (Elliott, 2007, 30-62; 1991).

Let us move on to our second theme of inquiry: To what extent does Elliott's model actually require this liberal epistemology? Is it logically necessary – and even desirable – for them to come together? If not, can we identify foreseeable pedagogical consequences deriving from their separation? My answer to this series of questions is a complex one and I will formulate it through two separate theoretical arguments. The first one stems from the conviction that the foundation provided by a liberal epistemology is totally unnecessary for Elliott's defence of his procedural principles, the consistency of which is autonomous and could be defended for specifically *pedagogic*, not *epistemological*, reasons. I am insisting both on the need to distinguish between the realms of epistemology and pedagogy and on the validity of Elliott's pedagogical theses, regardless of any further epistemological claim.

Let us unfold this argument. The truth is that Elliott seems to have favoured this view at least once in the 2007 anthology of selected works. He does so by suggesting that the validity of his approach was independent of deeper epistemological considerations, such as the aforementioned discussion on truth and falsity and, most importantly, independent of whether or not one believes in the social need for curricula to include a compulsory set of content-aims that guarantee the intergenerational transmission of certain knowledge. The contextual circumstances in which such formulation occurred, however, reveal Elliott was not thereby expressing his deepest views on the matter but rather reaching a compromise with a different point of view. It took place in the background to the Ford Project, on an occasion in which Elliott encountered different outlooks on the means and ends dilemma coming from teachers with different opinions to his own:

> Our teachers disagreed about whether other ends, such as knowledge outcomes that are extrinsically related to these [procedural] approaches, could be pursued at the same time. But what was agreed was that… whatever knowledge outcomes are pursued, the methods one adopts must satisfy the criteria of protecting and fostering students' ability to achieve this knowledge through their own powers of reason (Elliott, 2007, 40).

While the terms employed in this extract are somewhat different from those we have drawn on elsewhere in this paper, I believe its meaning remains manifest: the aforementioned principles of action are compatible with, and independent of, any particular epistemological stance on the part of the teacher, hence independent also of the fulfilment of certain knowledge outcomes, which may be considered or not. As reasonable as this thesis may sound, the truth is that – as I have said – it did not express Elliott's genuine viewpoint, as revealed by other papers. Many are the times he defines this position in terms of a purely *instrumental* version of his own pedagogy and of the action research practice he devised to monitor it. According to him, this variant and dubious version of his pedagogy adopted procedural principles as a means to fulfil content-goals that remained entirely disconnected from them; in other words, this variant approach embraced Elliott's ethical principles as a mere technique to facilitate the learning of contents that need not be logically related with that ethical code – furthermore, they could be in open contradiction with it. This alternative pedagogy remained loyal to objective knowledge, but if truth existed for Elliott, we know it involved an ethical experience.

3. The unsuspected potential of John Elliott's pedagogy for teaching content-goals in the social and human sciences

I will now advance my second theoretical argument. My hope is that it will enable this paper to respond definitively to the set of interrogations previously formulated, which inquired about the pedagogical potential we may find in Elliott's procedural pedagogy once it becomes separated from the liberal theory of knowledge it was founded on. The main thesis I want to defend in this section is that there are indeed sound, positive reasons for endorsing Elliott's procedural pedagogy, albeit for different – even opposite – motives from those rationalized by Elliott himself. According to my alternative view, the strongest argument to validate his approach lies in its being the only one capable of allowing students to learn about the key subject matters of the social and human sciences. This can happen independently of whether the teacher believes in the objectivity of the knowledge transmitted by the social and the human sciences – with the proviso that s/he does not directly deny this possibility inside the classroom, of course. If, on the contrary, the teacher believes in the existence of objective knowledge (and in the convenience of learning it), the chances are the students will develop this interest for themselves and work towards obtaining a scientific understanding in these fields of study, even if – *especially if*, actually – the teacher does not bluntly present these contents to them as objective truths, since this option might not be pedagogically effective.

Even with these conditions, I hope that it becomes clear that the contrast between this perspective, which praises Elliott's pedagogy for its potential to satisfy certain content-goals, and the author's account of his own pedagogical design, which is solely interested in the ethical dimension of the process, is very significant.

But, paradoxical as it may sound (completely alien to, even in contradiction with, Elliott's own self-understanding), I believe it is justified by sophisticated, rational epistemological and pedagogical standards; it is based on the hypothesis that certain subject matters, *because of their own intrinsic, objective characteristics*, demand that knowledge about them be obtained exclusively through a pedagogical process conducted by Elliott's procedural principles, or similar ones. We can rephrase this hypothesis as a *sine qua non* proposition: students will attain an objective representation of the nature of certain subject matters *if*, *and only if*, the teacher conducts the learning process through Elliott's pedagogy.

The one subject matter I have in mind is, of course, society: every single phenomenon existing or taking place inside it whose knowledge scientists, academics, or educators who labour in the field of social and human sciences access and transmit. Why there should be an elective affinity between knowledge about society and Elliott's pedagogical principles is the one question we now have to discuss. In my opinion, the feature that makes society so suitable a subject matter for Elliott's principles (to the extent that any other approach would be denied access to this knowledge) has to do with society being neither external to, nor separate from, the individual trying to learn something about it – in this case, the *student*. This alone, the fact that any scientific or educational attempt to understand society must take place from inside it, immediately creates a complex dialectic between the subject and the object of inquiry (between the observer and the subject matter, in which the former, however, is also included), which necessarily complicates the learning process in ways that are extremely difficult to solve and compensate for. The complexity is such that, as a rule, it has been overlooked by liberal scientific rationality, which does not always identify these complications correctly nor is it able to correct them. Because of its atomistic paradigm, for instance, (one according to which the individual is the only true methodological unit in the social and human sciences) liberal sociology and humanities close their eyes to these epistemological and pedagogical obstacles (Fine and Milonakis, 2011). The other prominent paradigm of the Cold War, on the contrary, attempted to conceptualize it. One of Karl Marx's seminal contributions to the social and human sciences was precisely his ability to advance through the first stages of a theory of the *ideological reflexes* and *outer forms of manifestation* that one can find active in society (Marx and Engels, 1978, 154; Marx, 1894, 265 and 287; Wrigley, 2011, 11-14; Camangian, 2013, 119-123). Every social formation, he argued, includes objective factors that derive from its specific economic structure (and from the social division it creates) that result in individuals developing inadequate representations of the essential nature of the society they live in. Such representations do not occur by chance, but a have their roots in the everyday, superficial impressions that individuals experience from their specific social standpoint. These impressions do not translate correctly the deep and complex causal processes that underlie social reality and can therefore be described as *real* (since they have a material explanation) but cognitively *false*. Taking

on the theses of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, Pauline Gibbons offers a perfect description of this mechanism from the educational context:

> Vygotsky argues that spontaneous concepts emerge from a child's everyday experiences. While they may be rich they are embedded within specific situational contexts and instances and are therefore not systematic, thus they will vary from learner to learner. Scientific concepts, on the other hand, are located within the structured and specialized discourse of the subject, are relatively more fixed and are systematically and logically organized and related (Gibbons, 2006, 4-5).

It may sound extremely paradoxical that a British, liberal pedagogue such as John Elliott, who has only taken but a marginal interest in bringing together the goals of education with the defence of the objectivity of the social sciences and with the need for a coherent socio-economic transformation based on that knowledge – especially if we judge the latter by Marxist standards (Elliott, 2007, 21) –, should have come up with an essential pedagogic contribution to the possibility of satisfying these goals in particular. Yet this is precisely my point. I believe Elliott's approach is one of the few ones capable of overcoming the kind of pedagogical obstacles a student necessarily meets in the process of learning about society, which s/he necessarily forms part of, and thus misconstrues. Because of this, my claim is that the significance of his pedagogy extends far beyond the scope of the liberal tradition in which it naturally belongs. In fact, I believe it can make an important contribution to critical and even radical pedagogies concerned with the relationship between education and *emancipation*, and do so by hinting at the problems of the traditional conception of emancipation, one that depends on transparent knowledge about one's own social condition (Biesta, 2010).

Let me explain my reasons in the simplest terms. For a pupil to obtain a more objective insight into any range of social phenomena, s/he needs to comprehend first the social mechanisms that underpin his/her present viewpoint, that is, the objective reasons that explain its necessarily biased nature. This is to say that, before any student can attain a more scientific social standpoint, s/he must be able to question, criticize and finally understand the need to compensate for the variables that until then have determined him/her as a social being and observer. This necessarily implies, as Cummins states of any knowledge generation process, putting into question one's identity, or at least expanding it (1994, 32 and 52). «Every student has a right to ask: what has my history, my experiences as an individual living in capitalist society made of me that I no longer want to be?», says Peter McLaren (2011, 231). As simple as this right may seem, we need to understand that its actualization in fact implies two different kinds of knowledge, two distinct advances that, however, cannot be separated. The process of becoming more informed and learning more about the nature of any social phenomenon cannot be distinguished from the process of becoming more informed, and learning more, about oneself as part of that society, i.e. as a social product. Paolo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) found an illuminating way to describe this logic: in order to read

and understand the *word*, one must learn to read and understand the *world*, and one's place inside it.

Having said this, the key idea that justifies the elective affinity I find between Elliott's pedagogy and the critical teaching of the social and human sciences has to do with the fact that the second type of knowledge (about oneself) cannot be *learnt* in an orthodox way: for example, through an approach that simply aims to *transmit* information in a unilateral manner (Cummins, 2001, 229). Paolo Freire (1973, 58) called this the «banking model of education». Neither could this knowledge, as we shall see, be learnt solely through the specific qualities that Cummins and Pauline Gibbons both attribute to the Vygotskian, socio-constructivist interaction model (Gibbons, 2006, 15-42), which they place in opposition to the aforementioned «transmission» model. The important point in this regard is that knowledge about oneself cannot be taught before the student experiences it, and its learning must therefore be simultaneous and indistinct from an unfolding experience.

We have just encountered the one concept the analysis of which will underlie the rest of the paper: *experience*. It is the crux to understanding my line of reasoning. While the experiential dimension is clearly present in much of the research that is being produced today in the field of education, related both to teaching and learning (Bengtsson, 2013; Mulcahy, 2012; González Martín and Fuentes, 2012; Kim, 2012; Elffers *et al.*, 2012; Mateos Blanco and Nuñez Cubero, 2011; Thrift, 2011), the truth is, however, that *experience* is not usually defined. «Most studies», Del Quest and others (2012, 1605) say, «have sought to capture a snapshot of the youth's experiences by interviewing them once or twice», but they do not provide a further theoretical framework that identifies in it specific variables. When experience is defined, as in Kim (2012) or Bengtsson (2013), the description is taken from some other field of knowledge (from phenomenological philosophy, in this example) and remains distant from the singularity and concreteness of the educational realm. «Lived experience is the "breathing of meaning" (van Mannen, 1990, p. 36), as it assigns "meaning to the phenomena of lived life through meditations, conversations, daydreams, inspirations and other interpretative acts" (p. 37)» (Kim, 2012, 631). Even Elliott's work, in which experience plays such an important role, falls short in this issue. In the introduction to his 2007 selected writings, for instance, his main concern was summarized as that of helping students to have a *worthwhile educational experience* in class, a formulation that requires further determination before it can become a significant concept in the sphere of education.

To compensate for this vagueness, I propose that an educational or pedagogical experience be defined according to two qualities that, if satisfied, will necessarily involve a third one. I take a worthwhile educational experience to mean a process whereby [1] students learn new knowledge *about themselves* that, in addition, [2] provokes in them a certain degree of discomfort, suffering or *anxiety*, precisely because the new ideas challenge the older ones around which the student has formed his/her own identity. I will soon account for the necessity of this negative experiential dimension, which, as denounced by Giroux (1987, 20-21), is

often absent from most critical pedagogues who approach experience by resorting to Vygotsky's notion of *zone of proximal development*. An educational experience does not progress as smoothly as this notion suggests, but – as we shall see next – may verge on the traumatic. However, let me add first that, should these two conditions be satisfied, one could expect this learning process to [3] reveal theoretical as well as practical long-term effects (as only real learning can bring about); that is, one could foresee a definite change in the student's behaviour regarding the specific sphere of action dealt with by new knowledge.

Regarding the need to include suffering in this scheme, it is not a foreign move to other fields in the social and the human sciences that have accommodated anxiety in their own technical vocabulary, and connected it with the necessary dynamics of their field-specific interests. A recent reflection on pedagogy coming from a Latin-American-based, psychoanalytic context, for example, described the effectiveness of psychotherapy as accomplishing a «word-act that shall be transformative to the extent that it involves suffering» (Gallo, 2012, 16). Psychoanalysis affords us a model for some of the ideas we are exploring, since it interprets suffering as an index of a patient working through *repression* and gaining access to new unconscious, psychic content that (due to its traumatic and painful character) had remained repressed until then. Should we push this analogy between psychotherapy and education further, as was done in Cho (2009, 73-93) and Lewis (2009, 449), we would of course have to ask ourselves what kind of suffering or anxiety a teacher can expect to occur as a result of a knowledge process inside the classroom.

I believe the following extracts may provide us with some clues concerning this matter. The first one echoes the thoughts of a teenaged student (Justine) after having finished a class activity that allowed her to become aware of the stereotypes inherent in those children's stories that, through the popular media, she had grown up with, and then reflect on the mechanism whereby the latter had influenced her own illusions:

> It can be overwhelming to find out my whole self-image has been formed mostly by others or underneath my worries about what I look like are years (17 of them) of being exposed to TV images of girls and their set roles given to them by TV and the media. It's painful to deal with. The idea of not being completely responsible for how I feel about things today is scary. So why dissect my dreams? Why not stay ignorant about them and happy? The reason for me is that those dreams are not unrelated to my everyday life. They influence how I behave, think, react to things… My dreams keep me from dealing with an unpleasant reality (Christensen, 2000, 42).

The next text, in contrast, relates a student's after-thoughts upon having analyzed his previous, childhood history textbooks critically during a group activity conducted by the pedagogue and high-school history teacher Bill Bigelow (2008).

> If we can't believe what our first grade teachers told us, why should we believe you? If they lied to us, why wouldn't you? If one book is wrong, why isn't another? What is your purpose in telling us about how awful Chris[topher Columbus] was? What interest do you have in telling us the truth? What is it you want from us? (20).

I believe both extracts bear witness to different stages in the kind of learning experience I am attempting to describe. Whatever the concrete painful feelings involved (the first quote conveys a more reflective mood, as if the student had already pulled herself together after the initial stages of disbelief, embarrassment, and anger; the second one, on the other hand, is a full expression of anxiety), and whatever the stage in the aforementioned learning process, my point is that feelings such as these are consubstantial to, and inseparable from, an individual finally picturing him- or herself as part of an objective inertia, and questioning thereby his/her identity; that is, consubstantial to, and inseparable from, a student learning about him- or herself as a social product, the main aspects of which the individual was not free to decide, since it mostly occurred unbeknownst to him or her.

I consider that access to this self-reflective perspective is the one trait that defines a worthwhile educational experience. All other pedagogic approaches seem somewhat withdrawn from the true educational challenges. Likewise, my belief is that only a pedagogy that is built on Elliott's five procedural principles can actually provide the interactional teacher-student framework capable of triggering this dynamic and of sustaining a student through it. Now, in order for a pupil to progress through the obstacles and resistances s/he brings to the classroom that bar access to this knowledge, s/he must express them; s/he must objectify them through teacher-student and student-student interactions that leave behind oral and written texts as landmarks of the students' experience. This idea is fully consistent with Elliott's suggestion that lessons should rely more on discussion than on instruction – not because there is no factual knowledge to be instructed on, as he believes, but because discussion is the only way to approach and learn the kind of objective content we are looking for, this being the main idea that defines Elliott's liberal pedagogy against critical and radical versions (Beckett, 2013).

There is one last reason why Elliott's principles would be especially adequate for this goal. It has to do with the fact that, for this educational experience to be completed, students must never get the wrong impression that the teacher is playing an active role in their own suffering, that is, that the educator is imposing on them a painful experience, or even worse, that s/he is enjoying it, extracting some gain from it – a suspicion the speaker in the second quote clearly expresses. On the contrary, they must understand that the negative feelings they are experiencing are a necessary and normal effect of a purely logical learning process, hence the price every student has to pay in order to obtain a more valuable enrichment: understanding reality in terms that are more sophisticated, and having the chance to take hold of one's life more responsibly. In other words, being able to deal with the *unpleasant reality* Justine mentioned in the first quote.

Students should conceive of the educational process as something that, despite taking place inside the institutional setting of the classroom, each of them has freely embarked on. They must commit themselves to it; they must take responsibility for their own learning, otherwise there will be no conceivable way for the teacher to sustain or support them through this development – except by *forcing* them, of course; but this would betray the original purpose of this method, and students' emotional resistances would surely disable any true learning from occurring. If there is one thing liberal societies take pride in knowing (whether the social dynamics develop accordingly or not), it is that political commitments cannot be forced on either of the parts involved. This remains true for the pedagogical realm. No one is keen on going through hurtful experiences, especially without his or her agreement. Thus, the only consistent method for a teacher to promote this indispensable commitment is by setting the conditions that allow it to unfold once students are spurred by their curiosity into the learning process.

I must underscore the humbleness of these words, since humbleness is also inherent in Elliott's approach. Keeping his or her interventions to «openness», «tolerance», «respect», and «freedom of opinion and criticism» is, to the best of my knowledge, the only way a teacher can avoid cancelling outright the possibility of the students' commitment to rise in the classroom, as well as to consolidate it once it happens. This is the one opportunity provided by Elliott's principles, even if they alone cannot guarantee that the key experience, and true learning, will occur. «That the teacher accepts the need to submit his teaching in controversial areas to the criterion of neutrality at this stage of education, i.e. that he regards it as part of his responsibility not to promote his own view»; «that the mode of enquiry in controversial areas should have discussion, rather than instruction, as its core»; «That the discussion should protect divergence of view among participants, rather than attempt to achieve consensus» (Elliott, 2007, 22; 1991, 16) – these three principles are especially important – plus some others we could possibly think of, such as: That *evaluation* should consist in students describing in their own words the change undergone (if any) by their ideas on the specific subject matter of concern to the course; or that the *grade* should reflect, not certain definite, content-goals, but rather the degree of responsibility or commitment a student has shown along this process, on the basis of what s/he has written about it but also on the evidence collected by the teacher –, principles such as these, I say, may not guarantee that true learning takes place in the field of the human and social sciences, but they undoubtedly provide the only safe pedagogical framework for us to remain hopeful that it may do so. Difficult as it seems, any other pedagogical alternative renders true knowledge impossible.

4. Conclusion

I hope I have clearly outlined the main theses I aimed to put forward in this paper. It may be worthwhile to summarize them. I believe the core of John Elliott's

pedagogy remains valuable for the social and the human sciences, even though the justification provided in this paper differs from Elliott's original one. I have attempted to show that his pedagogical principles are worthwhile neither because of ethical reasons, i.e. not because they participate in the classical tenets of liberal ideology (which they do), nor because the possibility of objective knowledge has in fact been abolished in the realm of the social sciences, as liberalism proposed (with the corresponding predominance of the *means* of education as opposed to its *content-goals*). While these were the motives argued by Elliott to justify his own ideas, I believe his self-perception was flawed, more often than not. In contrast, I have argued that his pedagogy conforms to scientific rationality while his own understanding of it remains *ideological*. Because of this, it should prove helpful to any socio-pedagogical endeavour that commits itself to the transmission of objective knowledge, as is the case of critical pedagogies. John Elliott's pedagogical principles are valuable and effective for reasons that relate to the objective variables characterizing the key subject matters of the social and the human sciences. These variables – the fact that students are formed by the same reality they have to obtain a knowledge of – pose specific pedagogical obstacles to the students' learning, which Elliott's principles, as I have tried to show, are particularly well suited to compensate for. My conclusion is therefore that John Elliott does not provide educators in the social and the human sciences with a liberal pedagogy, but rather with an appropriate method for them to fulfil their main educational goal: to help students understand the nature of the key subject matters that determine their life in society.

The application of the «five principles of procedure for handling cultural content in classrooms», which Elliott (1998, 109) placed at the heart of his pedagogy and action research model, derives from recognizing certain limits to the educators' power to ensure the learning process. Unlike what is often assumed of knowledge, i.e. that it can be imposed, educators must realize that they cannot enforce certain feelings or emotions on their students in relation to the contents, at least not those which may be conducive to learning. In this respect at least, they are impotent, and it is desirable that they remain so. The affective transition on which learning depends lies entirely in the hands of each individual student, who must build the bridge across from his or her original cultural experiences (and the affects attached to them) to the new ones. Hence the impossible nature of presuming to organize a successful learning process *against* the students, without their active involvement or by assigning them a passive role. «Allowing students to participate in constructing the learning process», Romero, Cammarota, Domínguez *et al*. (2008) claim, «encourages them to perceive education as their project, something they can create. […] No longer do they sit passively waiting to be told what to do; they realize that they too have something to offer education and society» (136). If the success of the affective transition depends on whether or not students are given the opportunity to participate actively in their learning process, this in turn will only occur provided that, as this quote shows, a significant degree of freedom and equality is shared

among all the agents involved in it, teachers and students equally. Herein lies the essential pedagogical role I attribute to Elliott's liberal principles. Only if students are allowed to express themselves along the educational process will they be able to transfer the affects which clung originally to their previous cultural representations to the new scientific ones that, at first, were foreign and threatening to them. Only then may the cognitive and affective transitions take place, and learning ensue. The first transition lies in the hands of the educator, who must design and organize all the cultural elements involved in the educational context. Yet for these elements to crystallize into a concrete learning process, the students' agency still remains the moving force. And the educator must be able to recruit it. Thus, in the end, the pedagogical orientations which enable students to traverse their own prejudices, superficial representations or ideological reflexes are those which allow them to exercise their agency through written or oral self-expressions in which affects as well as concepts become involved. By objectifying their cognitive lines of thought through personal written or oral narratives, essays, monologues, poems, etc., students open up a space within themselves for new learning to occur. And the more they express themselves in the classroom, the more they will clear new ground that allows them to transform. Naturally, dialogue and not one-way instruction must become the main educational method.

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