
In defense of teaching: the common and existential openness amidst digital algorithms

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to contrast the subjectivity that emerges from the increasingly prolonged interaction with digital algorithms characteristics attributed to school by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons. To do so, we oppose the possibility of stepping out of oneself – in other words, “suspension” – and living in a common world – “profanation” –, offered to students by *skholé*, to what researcher Fernanda Bruno sees as the “seizure of the future” and the “confiscation of the common”, almost inevitable effects of the business model of social networks. In addition, at the end of the text, we turn to the etymology of “teaching” in order to infer some possibilities of teaching action in the contemporary scenario. Teaching, as we want to argue, is *in-signare*, it is to place signs, which presupposes, on the one hand, the recognition that the world and reality (and therefore the content taught) are not self-evident and, on the other, a willingness to create something common, communicable – these two dimensions, in our view, are fundamental for a school that confronts algorithmic subjectivity.

Key-words: Teaching. *Skholé*. Digital Algorithms. Common.

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Em defesa do ensino: o comum e a abertura existencial em meio aos algoritmos digitais

Resumo

Este artigo tem por intuito contrastar a subjetividade que emerge da vida cada vez mais prolongada com os algoritmos digitais, características daquilo que Jan Masschelein e Maarten Simons atribuem à escola. Para tanto, opomos a possibilidade de sair de si – ou seja, a “suspensão” – e a de viver um mundo comum – a “profanação” – oferecida aos alunos pela *skholé*, ao que a pesquisadora Fernanda Bruno enxerga como o “sequestro do futuro” e o “confisco do comum”, efeitos quase inevitáveis do modelo de negócios das redes sociais. Além disso, ao fim do texto, recorreremos à etimologia de “ensinar” a fim de inferir algumas possibilidades de ação docente em meio ao cenário contemporâneo. Ensinar, como queremos defender, é *in-signare*, é colocar signos, o que pressupõe, por um lado, o reconhecimento de que o mundo e a realidade (e, portanto, os conteúdos ensinados) não são autoevidentes e, por outro, uma disposição para a criação de algo comum, comunicável – essas duas dimensões, a nosso ver, são fundamentais para uma escola que faça frente à subjetividade algorítmica.

Palavras-chave: Ensino. *Skholé*. Algoritmos Digitais. Comum.

En defensa de la enseñanza: la apertura común y existencial en medio de los algoritmos digitales

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es contrastar la subjetividad que emerge de la interacción cada vez más prolongada con algoritmos digitales características atribuidas a la educación por Jan Masschelein y Maarten Simons. Para ello, oponemos la posibilidad de salir de uno mismo – es decir, la “suspensión” – y de vivir un mundo común – la “profanación” –, que ofrece a los estudiantes la *skholé* a lo que la investigadora Fernanda Bruno percibe como el “secuestro del futuro” y la “confiscación de lo común”, efectos casi inevitables del modelo de negocios de las redes sociales. Además, al final del texto, recurrimos a la etimología de “enseñar” para inferir posibilidades de acción docente en medio del escenario contemporáneo. Enseñar, como queremos argumentar, es *in-signare*, es colocar signos, lo que presupone, por un lado, el reconocimiento de que el mundo y la realidad (y, por lo tanto, el contenido enseñado) no son autoevidentes y, por otro, una disposición para crear algo común, comunicable – estas dos dimensiones, en nuestra opinión, son fundamentales para una escuela que haga frente a la subjetividad algorítmica.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza. Skholé. Algoritmos Digitales. Común.

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Introduction

The concerns that trigger this article arise from an encounter, a clash.

On the one hand, the questions with which Masschelein and Simons (2014b) characterize what “school” has to do with, especially two of them: the question of suspension and the question of desecration. The first frees students, for the time they are in school, from what is expected of them outside of school, in other words, it is not their surname, their social class, their gender, their color that determines their interests, their potential, at least when, according to the authors, school is, in fact, school. The second issue, profanation, has to do with the movement that deactivates the ordinary functions of things in the world and makes them available for shared study in the classroom or, in other words, it has to do with an effort to make these things common – which, outside of school, are private, belong to those who can access them, to those who have the knowledge, to those who have the money, to those who have whatever power is in vogue.

On the other hand, there are two expressions coined by Fernanda Bruno (2020) to describe the workings of contemporary algorithmic digital platforms: the “kidnapping of the future” and the “confiscation of the common”. The definition of user profiles based on their previous movements on the networks, on the one hand, means that what will be suggested to them in the future is a more or less identical repetition of what has already happened; on the other hand, this profile definition is personalized, it creates bubbles that no one but the user him or herself can enter, and, in this process, it is the shared dimension of existence that ever increasingly suffers.

On the one hand, then, there is an institution that keeps its power in the possibility of misleading, of inviting people to step outside of themselves and deprivatize, of making something common; on the other, there is a logic to return to the inner self and fixator. And, between these two worlds, live children and adolescents. According to Brazil’s Federal Constitution (Brasil, 2020), to educate is the duty of the State and the family and is compulsory from the age of four to seventeen, which implies that, ideally, young people in this age group attend school. At the same time, according to the TIC (Information and Communication Technology) Kids Online survey (2022), in 2022, 92% of the population aged between nine and seventeen were internet users, and 86% of them had a profile on at least one social network, especially Instagram and TikTok, as well as using the web to watch films, series and videos in general, on platforms such as Youtube and Netflix, and to listen to music. Are the effects of immersion in the logic of these networks and platforms limited to the time spent on them? In other words, is it possible that the way of being conditioned by this digital environment implies changes in students’ subjectivity to the point where this becomes a school issue?

In this sense, we agree with the perception of Philippe Meirieu (2021, p. 296) who, in his “Dictionnaire inattendu de pédagogie”, in a curious comment on the pedagogical impact of photocopiers, writes that “[...] the appearance of certain objects can radically change the mentalities, world-views, and also the behavior of a human group and its institutions”. In terms of education, these are not recent transformations. Ariès (2014), for example, recalls that school was rehabilitated in the Renaissance after the invention of Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press: children, who until then had begun to participate in the adult world as soon as they had mastered the oral codes of society in a relatively consistent manner, began to have their specificities

taken into account. With the printing press and the transformation of European society into a written society, knowing how to read and write became important, lengthening the period of childhood and making schools necessary. The school form itself, as defined by Vincent, Lahire and Thin (2001), based on the written word and the abstractions of reason derived from this form, depends on the propagation of books resulting from Gutenberg's creation.

It is precisely this link between the educational and technological worlds, on the other hand, that leads Neil Postman (1999) to fear the end of childhood and the consequent end of school: as soon as the printed word loses ground to the television image. The author ponders that a scenario emerges in which the maturation period for access to the main language that organizes the public sphere is reduced, making it unnecessary.

In a similar line of argument, Corea (2004) and Sibilia (2021) investigate how a certain pedagogical subjectivity, traditionally required by schools, clashes with the "media subjectivity", resulting from immersion in the television world and, more recently, in the virtual sphere, especially with regard to the attention periods typical of each of these environments. Thinking about the impact of Google on education, from a perspective that is less interested in students and more focused on teachers, Charlot (2012 and 2019) has argued that it will be necessary for teachers to abandon their pretensions of being "information teachers", since they will never be able to store as much content as the electronic search engine – from now on, he argues, they will need to become "knowledge teachers", concerned with helping students to deal critically and autonomously with what they find on the web.

Finally, more recently, ourselves have had the opportunity to work on these technological spillovers into the school world: in one of them (Coppi, 2023b), we investigated teaching based on the excess of information and opinions that circulate in the contemporary world through networks; in another (Coppi, 2023b), we looked at the challenges for schools arising from the structural characteristics of the platforms used for remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

For all these reasons, we do not think it is unreasonable to assume that the algorithmic logic, which is the very architecture of social networks, causes effects on student subjectivity – or at least makes them more possible. These effects, it seems to us, clash with what defines a certain notion of school that

takes seriously the “suspension” and “profanation,” addressed by Masschelein and Simons (2014b).

In this sense, the central aim of this article is to investigate the dissonance between the pretensions to this suspension and desecration operated, at least ideally, by the school and the “hijacking of the future” and the “confiscation of the common” derived from algorithmic logic, as understood by Fernanda Bruno (2020). In addition, we are also interested in recovering, in its potency, the meaning of a banal school gesture, but one that, in our view, carries in its roots important traits for school doing in an algorithmized world: the gesture of “teaching.”

To this end, we have organized the text as follows: firstly, we will summarize the notions of “suspension” and “profanation” in the light of what Masschelein and Simons write about “*skholé*,” a Greek idea based above all on the creation of a time and space freed from the logics that govern the world outside it. In a second moment, we will focus on the workings of algorithms: in order to arrive at the “kidnapping of the future” and the “confiscation of the common,” we will carry out a brief bibliographical review in order to describe and explain how these digital filters operate and, here again, we intend to highlight the tensions between the subjectivity proposed by contemporary communication networks and that to which they invite suspension and profanation. From there, our work will be to rehabilitate the etymology of “teaching” and infer from it some lines of action that, from the heart of one of the school’s most typical activities, can tackle the challenges linked to the interdictions of the future and the fragmentation of what is common. Methodologically, as this work is based above all on reading and formulating hypotheses, we will use hermeneutics as understood by Paul Ricoeur (2013). For this author, the meaning of a text is never ready in the text itself, but derives from the encounter between the reader and what is read. From this encounter, “potential horizons of meaning” emerge, which must be pursued with argumentative rigor – and this is what we are seeking here: from the tense encounter between what is typically scholastic and what seems to define the algorithmic experience, we formulate our hypotheses, foresee some horizons, and carefully seek to describe and problematize them.

Skholé

At the beginning of the second chapter of the book "In defense of school: a public issue," Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons list some apparent obvious facts about school: in common sense, it is common ground that the institution to which the children are directed has the purpose of preparing them for adult life. It is there, according to the most common ideas, that "[...] young people (according to a specific method) are provided with everything they need to learn in order to find their place in society [...]; it is there that [...] children are equipped with the knowledge and skills peculiar to an occupation [...]" – and school is also the cheapest method of doing all this (Masschelein; Simons, 2014b, p. 25).

6 In these perceptions, school is always a means. On some occasions, it is for achieving the desired society; on others, for the very maintenance of a given social life; there is also, and perhaps this is the most frequent idea, the perception that what the school serves is the job market, it is for this that students should be trained in their school years. Therefore, the institution, in this case, will be evaluated to the exact extent that it is effective for this purpose. These perceptions, however, end up leaving several questions open: If the school's function is, for example, to make it possible to adapt to a given society, but that society is racist and misogynistic, what does it mean to adapt the new generations? It is necessary to keep quiet about social changes and transformations to bet on a school geared towards this end. On the other hand, if the school's job is to prepare for an ideal future society, perhaps we should ask ourselves who can dream of such a future: after all, the ideals of the extreme right, for example, would outline the school institution based on values that are largely opposed to those of democratic and humanist ideals. If the groups in power change, should the school institution as a whole also reconfigure itself from scratch since other objectives are desired? Something similar happens with the submission of the school to the labor market. In Brazil, if a child completes the entire basic cycle of education, he or she spends more than a decade inside the institution, enough time for labor guidelines to change. Some professions emerge, others disappear, they are replaced by new technologies and, in this ever-increasing fluidity, what would the school be based on?

Masschelein and Simons propose a departure from common sense on the subject and decide to recover the origin of the word "school". This return

to the roots of the word, they explain in another book (Masschelein; Simons, 2014a, p. 159), that is not intended to “[...] carry out a historical reconstruction [...] or engage in an essentialist analysis”. In line with Hannah Arendt, the authors state that this interest in beginnings is intended to “[...] distil from them [the words] their original spirit” and to think from there about what these words give rise to, almost as if they were “thought exercises,” “experiments, attempts to clarify some issues and to gain some assurance to tackle specific questions.” In other words, it is as if, faced with the primary meanings attached to one word or another, we set out to think: “What if?” What if we accept this definition? What does that mean? What does that give us to think about?

Let us return, then, in this spirit, to the way they reconstruct the word “school.”

On the very first page of the introduction to the book they dedicate to defending this institution, Masschelein and Simons (2014b) state that the most usual translation of the term comes from the Greek “*skholé*,” which, in its origins, meant something like “free time.” In this sense, the school would offer “[...] free time for study and practice [...] to people who had no right to it according to the archaic order in force at the time” (Masschelein and Simons, 2014b, p. 9). A little further on, they write the following:

[...] the school is a specific (political) invention of the Greek *polis* and [...] emerged as a usurpation of the privilege of the aristocratic and military elites in ancient Greece. In the Greek school, it was no longer someone’s origin, race or “nature” that justified their belonging to the class of the good and the wise. [...] The Greek school rendered inoperative the archaic connection linking personal markers (race, nature, origin, etc.) to the list of corresponding acceptable occupations (working the land, engaging in business and commerce, studying, practicing). [...] In other words, the school provided *free time*, i.e., non-productive time, for those who by their birth and their place in society (their “position”) had no legitimate right to claim it. Or, to put it another way, what the school did was to establish a time and space that was, in a sense, separate from the time and space of both society (in Greek: *polis*) and the family (in Greek: *oikos*) (Masschelein; Simons, 2014b, p. 26).

It is from this semantic universe that the authors derive eight traits that characterize the “school”: suspension and profanation – which are of particular interest to us in this work – and, beyond them, attention to the world and

interest in it; the technologies that give form to school practices, to the study, to the formation of discipline; equality, which starts from the affirmation of a certain non-differentiation; love, which refers to caring for the world and making oneself present; preparation, which aims less at what is to come and more at being in shape, aware of limits; and, finally, pedagogical responsibility, which has to do with a specific exercise of authority. Let us focus, however, on the first two of these traits.

From the notion of “free space and time,” i.e., a space and time freed from what orders life beyond the school walls, Masschelein and Simons state that a characteristic of *skholé* is the temporary inactivation of what governs the world outside: in other words, a temporary and localized “suspension” of the logics that govern external reality. In this sense, by becoming “pupils,” children and adolescents could experience, in the interval in which they find themselves in this place, that is neither the family home nor the public space, an emancipation that has less to do with becoming bigger and more to do with experiencing themselves as other. A black girl, the eldest daughter of a middle-class couple with aspirations for their children’s social ascension by entering universities, that will make them stand out in the job market, for example, is surrounded outside of school by expectations about what belongs to her, about what her place would be. Her color and gender, in a racist and sexist society, imply interdictions, worries and fears that a heterosexual white boy, for example, would never experience; her status as the eldest daughter may sometimes demand that she take responsibility for her younger siblings; the family’s economic aspirations for the children may define what is important or not in their education, i.e., knowledge useful for the entrance exam, for example, may take precedence over interest in music, in arts and in less applicable sciences. When the school functions as *skholé*, the time spent there would bar these definitions: gender, color, family obligations and future aspirations would not delimit what the girl could be exposed to.

The authors argue that this creates “a gap in linear time.” This causality time ties what you can do and dream. The experience of *skholé*, on the other hand, suspends this relationship and opens a crack for a certain possibility of metamorphosis: “[...] it calls young people to the present time and frees them both from the potential burden of their past and from the potential pressure of a planned future [...]” (Masschelein; Simons, 2014b, p. 36). It is not because you come from a working-class family that you only must study what

interests you when you enter the world of work; it is not because you have a French surname that you will not study the literature produced in Angola or in Mozambique, for example. From this suspension, the future once again opens, as a possibility, as indefiniteness. In another text, Masschelein (2021, p. 31) argues that, when it actually operates as a school, this institution gives everyone “[...] the possibility of bifurcating, of finding their own destiny (of not being enclosed [...] in a nature or in a predefined identity, in a project of a ‘family’) [...]”; it offers those who attend it “the possibility of [...] determining oneself [...] and therefore also of renewing (and questioning) the world”.

So, Masschelein and Simons continue, by being able to, at least temporarily, suspend what would otherwise be their rightful places, students are led into a world that is new to them – and this is where another characteristic of the school emerges: profanation. Before we go on to discuss what links it to education, we should look at how Agamben (2007) defines it. For the author, the “sacred” is what belongs to the gods, it is the things that “[...] were subtracted from the free use and trade of men” (Agamben, 2007, p. 65). Consecrating something, in this sense, had to do with removing it from mundane reality and making it unavailable. By contrast, “profaning” is restoring to human use what had been banned. The *skholé*, then, not only suspends the destinations and fixed places of its visitors, it also suspends the consecrated uses of things in the world – therefore, profaning them. An engine, for example, in school, is no longer subject to the function of making a car move; it will be put on the table, dismantled and its parts studied. The same happens with other artifacts, with another knowledge. The Portuguese language, in this institution, is no longer just something that belongs to writers, poets, teachers and journalists; writing is no longer something that has to do only with those who have been granted a gift; mathematics is not a sacred object restricted to geniuses – all of this, at school, when it remains *skholé*, is profaned, is put into circulation, is made available to students who perhaps, outside of school, would not be able to handle these human productions, would not notice that they could also be within their reach, that they could pick them up, think about them and, not infrequently, could also reinterpret them, give them new meanings. But this only happens when these things are, to some extent, dispossessed of their ordinary uses, deprivatized, when they are available.

That is why the experience offered by the school cannot consist of the individual closing in on him/herself. The things profaned by the institution are

made available to everyone, and the meanings that emerge from this common, from the encounters and confrontations characterize this common. "School," write Masschelein and Simons (2014b, p. 40), "[...] does not consist of meeting individual needs [...] on the contrary, it consists of accompanying during class, dealing with *something*, being present for *something*."

THESE two characteristics – suspension and profanation – give us food to think about a school structured around two fundamental values or ambitions: on the one hand, an openness to processes of "disidentification", in other words, the individual's confrontation with him/herself, with what he/she has become accustomed to believing is his/her rightful place, with what fixes him/her in a definitive version of him/herself. On the other hand, the experience of the common, of coming face to face with a world that does not always correspond to our own expectations, that is not unequivocal either, and that can therefore only be inhabited through the construction of the common, the shared. Of course, these two traits are not given and definitively conquered in schools – in this regard, Masschelein and Simons affirm that the school as *skholé* may never have been achieved precisely because of the dismantled potency that its original senses carry. We are interested, however, in the fact that these two characteristics of *skholé*, regardless of what may have prohibited them at other times, are faced in contemporary times, with something that seems diametrically opposed to what delineates them: the algorithmic architecture of contemporary communication networks.

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Algorithms, confiscation, and kidnapping

Although the term "algorithm" has become commonplace in recent years in the digital context, it is worth remembering, that it is not a recent term, nor is it restricted to this sphere. Meirieu (2021) tells us that algorithm is a word derived from the name of a Persian mathematician from the 9th century, Al-Khwâzizmi, and refers to a set of specific operations organized to solve a specific problem. In this sense, continues Meirieu, algorithms are found in all areas of human life: if you need to organize a study routine, for example, and you have information such as the number of pages to read, the time available each day and the specific level of difficulty of each subject, you can program a sort of recipe with what you need to do at each moment in order to deal with

all the content. If you want to organize a trip and you have information such as the number of days you will be away, the monuments you want to visit, the distance between them, the days of free-tickets, an estimation of queues and son on, you can also create an algorithm that calculates a very suitable itinerary – there are many examples.

In digital terms, algorithms originally appeared as filters to deal with the torrent of information produced in this environment. In the contemporary context, Karwahi and Ramos (2023, p. 9) write: “[...] we are going through an information overload arising from the possibilities for everyone to produce and distribute content on the networks [...], which, the authors continue, “[...] has expanded not only access to knowledge, but also its sources”. Pariser (2012), regarding this profusion of data, says there is a risk of a “collapse of attention”, since the amount of content circulating on the networks would make it impossible for the human brain to cope with everything or even know how to choose what deserves attention or not. The algorithms of digital platforms are therefore designed to filter out what is relevant.

However, what is relevant to one person is not necessarily relevant to another. In order to be able to act in a precise and effective manner, the algorithms need to be formulated based on precise information about each user and, in this sense, everything is collected: in an information mining, pages liked and shared, screen time spent on one website or another, profiles followed and those followed by friends, downloads, in short, any trace left in network webs becomes potentially valuable data for defining a precise profile of the users and, based on these profiles, selecting what should or should not appear on their digital screen.

Enter the “micro-directions” (O’Neil, 2020) that individually address a comfortably personalized world to each one. The more comfortable he/she feel, the longer the user will stay on the platform and, therefore, the more time will spend exposed to the advertisements presented. Furthermore, and this is what really interests us here, these micro-targets create a kind of “informational determinism” (Pariser, 2012), in which data – such as what has been clicked on, what has been liked, what has been spent time on – begin to be counted and translated into the next indication that appears for the internet user. This is a form of curation (Saad Correa; Bartocchi, 2012) based on previous experiences and organized to produce an endless repetition of the same. The future produced there, writes Fernanda Bruno (2013, p. 170), has an immediate

character, “[...] because it acts in the present [...] and has [...] a performative and proactive effectiveness [...]”; the profiles built by these algorithms, continues the author “[...] aim to act on the field of possible actions and choices of individuals and groups, offering them projections that should incite or inhibit behavior”. Quoting Berns and Rouvroy, Bruno (2013) also states that the profile acts as a filter that increases the relevance of what is proposed in relation to current expectations and narrows the chances of changes in point of view, of broadening the field of interests.

Virtual filters, Pariser (2012) explains in this regard, reinforce the feeling of one-dimensionality of both the world and ourselves through two procedures: on the one hand, by surrounding us with “[...] ideas with which we are already familiar (and with which we already agree), giving us excessive confidence in our mental structure [...]”; on the other hand, by “removing [...] from our environment some of the main factors that encourage us to want to learn” (Pariser, 2012, p. 78 and 79). The first of these procedures, details the author a little further on, is what is known as “confirmation bias,” that is, a tendency to believe only what reinforces our pre-existing notions, which leads us to see only what we want to see, after all, “[...] the consumption of information that fits our ideas about the world is easy and pleasurable [...],” and “[...] the consumption of information that challenges us to think in new ways or to question our concepts is frustrating and difficult” (Pariser, 2012, p. 82 and 83). This phenomenon, the author continues, leads to the second procedure: the bubble built by the filter’s blocks “[...] ‘threats to meaning,’ the disturbing and confusing events that feed our desire to understand and acquire new ideas.”

Synthesizing these ideas, Bruno (2020, p. 258 and 259) writes that the algorithmic structure deprives us of common visions by offering us “[...] a personalized landscape that projects what we supposedly want to see, consume, hear, read, know, etc.”. “The personalized visible world of digital platforms,” she continues, “[...] is thus an anticipation of what would be to the taste and interest of each individual.” From this reflection, emerge the conditions necessary for Bruno to forge the two expressions which, in our view, clash head-on with suspension and desecration. The author writes a little further on:

The architecture of digital platforms and their algorithms thus favors connections based on homophily/similarity, drawing a disturbing

line of affinity between segregated cities, and polarized digital networks. The *confiscation of the common* on digital platforms is therefore neither natural nor necessary, but rather an effect of algorithmic architectures that make the construction and emergence of heterogeneous relationships and groups less likely. This involves a second effect of algorithmic mediation that I want to explore, which is the hijacking of the future on digital platforms. *Hijacking the future* because the landscapes we travel through in the digital ecosystem are also opportunities for interaction, for discovery, for crossing over to other environments and encounters. However, the business model that predominates today on these platforms and on the internet in general involves algorithmic processes with the promise and ability to act on behaviors as they happen, in order to intervene on the next step – clicks, likes, views and interactions with this or that content, shares, etc. Our online behaviors are thus constantly anticipated, implying a hijacking, at the everyday level, of our possible field of action, placed at the service of producing more and more engagement (Bruno, 2020, p. 262).

Like the author, it seems to us that the confiscation of the common and the hijacking of the future go hand in hand on the internet. Immersed in a reality filtered from him/herself, the user loses sight of a polysemic, diverse world. In other words, without counterpoints to the personalized reality he/she has become accustomed to, he/she is trapped in a single, inertial version of him/herself – existential and identity metamorphosis tends to be interdicted. In this sense, almost point by point, these digital consequences are opposed to suspension and desecration.

As for suspension, we must not lose sight of the fact that it depends on deactivating what we are. When students enter the *skholé*, they interrupt, for a certain period, what defines them outside of school and, in this interval that fosters indeterminacy, they can experience themselves as other, they can do what would not be proper to them, they can “leave their place,” an experience that is completely different from the kidnapping of the future. On the other hand, it is not possible to think of desecration when the common is confiscated: desecration, after all, has to do with making something available, open to the meanings constructed in a group, collectively. In a personalized world, however, there is no “deprivatization,” there is no expropriation of something in relation, in this case, to the meanings with which the “self” defines it. Again, it is important to remember that we do not think that desecration and suspension

have started to come under attack now – the authors of the terms themselves argue that it is precisely for what they imply that the school has been under attack since its creation. It seems unavoidable to us, however, to note that the conditions of the contemporary virtual world may accentuate a certain “algorithmic subjectivity” – taking up here the line of reflections of Corea (2004) and Sibilía (2014) – which, in its own way, poses specific challenges to schooling. And it is the lines of tackling these challenges that we will deal with next.

In defense of education

Inspired by the reflective procedures of Masschelein and Simons, we intend to suggest responses to these challenges that are also capable of radicalizing, of going to the roots, not to prescribe what a supposed essence would have to impose, but to make us see what has perhaps become trivialized over time but is worth recovering. These authors resorted to going back to the words, to the first meanings, to deal with problems that *they* diagnosed, which *they* saw as attempts to “tame” the school. What worries us is different, but, as we have tried to demonstrate, it also raises questions about schooling that do not seem negligible to us.

In this sense, despite what may be suggested by the title of the article and, specifically, of this section, our interest here is not in establishing a position in the dispute between didactics that are more focused on the unique processes of each student and others that are more concerned with the transmission of certain knowledge that has been consolidated throughout history. Various works have already contributed and still contribute to this discussion: Cordeiro (2002), for example, elaborates the debate in a fairly consistent way and points out its blind spots; in a similar line of argument, there are also the efforts of Georges Snyders (1974) to think of a “progressive pedagogy” that overcomes this apparent opposition between pedagogies seen as new and focused on “learning” and those called traditional and focused on “teaching”. For our part, then, what is at stake is to reflect on teaching from its etymology and, from there, to think about what this act brings of potent for the contemporary school.

Regarding the etymological roots of “teaching,” Luis Castello and Claudia Mársico write the following:

'To teach' comes from *insignare*, literally 'to place a sign,' 'to set an example.' The basis of the term is the Indo-European root *sekw*, which means 'to follow,' so that *signum*, the main formant of *insignare*, refers to the sense of 'sign,' 'mark' that must be followed in order to achieve something. The "sign" is therefore 'what is followed,' and to 'teach' is to put up signs so that others can orient themselves (Castello; Mársico, 2007, p. 39).

The first inference that seems inevitable from the above definition is that, if teaching is about "putting up signs," it is not about merely presenting an unequivocal world, defined once and for all and self-evident to anyone who encounters it. The world that teaching is about is the human world, built from human symbols. Its meaning, therefore, is not an inescapable fact, but a convention. It is true that we do not always realize this: accustomed to a single version of reality – whether due to custom, power asymmetries or algorithmic self-absorption – we may forget that it is just one possibility among others, a contingency. In other words, the world as we see it, and how we present it in our classrooms to our students, could be different if there were other crossings that characterize our way of apprehending it.

It also follows, secondly, that perceiving the symbolic world is something that only happens in the midst of a community. To a hypothetical human being who had never had contact with other human beings, after all, would not need necessary to create symbols to communicate, that is, to make common, what he/she experienced. Symbols thus always suggest a willingness, an openness, a movement of withdrawing what is private in a single individual and sharing it. Something is removed from this self-absorbed unavailability and is put into play, opened to other perspectives, to other meanings.

In this process, it seems to us, it is not just the things of the world that open again. The individual himself, in dealing with them in these terms, perhaps becomes unclosed. The world is vast, after all, and plural, multiple, dissonant. So too is the "self." To experience the world as becoming, as coming to be, is, to some extent, also to perceive oneself as unfixed, as distinct from a fully administered identity. The suspension of the senses of reality, then, becomes an invitation to bifurcation, to a destiny opening not as the realization of external ideals, but as a construction. The future, as an invention resulting from experiencing the other, is rescued.

These three inferences that we have made here, based on the etymology of “teaching,” are not aimed at establishing a methodology for dealing with the algorithmic subjectivity of our students. They function, we imagine, more as a reminder from which it seems possible to build a teaching posture, a decision about what matters in the classroom. Immersed in the rush and bureaucracy of everyday life, perhaps, over the years, we have also lost sight of the fact that what we put on our blackboards are signs, symbols, ways of constructing reality, and not reality itself. Without realizing it, however, we may have little to offer students who are used to this one-dimensionality outside of school. Algorithms, after all, by delivering a personalized, self-enclosed world to the screen of cell phones, are, in their own way, the experience of the single dimension, of the interdiction of metamorphosis, of apparently inescapable repetition. But school does not have to be like that either. In fact, if it is, it is not *skholé*. If it is not, then perhaps it cannot be anything at all.

In this sense it is fundamental, although laborious, the movement of returning to knowledge and *how we know the knowledge* we are dealing with. Bringing something into the classroom under the justification that “the curriculum demands it,” that “it is for the entrance exam,” that “it will be useful in the future,” that “that’s how my teachers did it,” that “everyone does it that way,” that you must learn it “because that’s the way things are” is something that, we believe, no longer works – not that it ever did. Especially today, however, these justifications sought in absolute terms imply detaching what is done from history, from the multiple and erratic process that constitutes us, the teachers, and from the content itself. Without this kind of foundation, it is not possible to offer students a different experience from the one they already find on the internet. If the aim for students is not to be what is presented to them as inevitable, it is important that we, as teachers, are able to exercise against ourselves: Why do we do things the way we do? Why do we take care of certain contents and bring them into our classrooms and not do the same with others? What do they say, not in the abstract, to anyone, but to us as unique individuals?

Continuously answering questions like these, it seems to us, is fundamental if we are not to lose sight of the fact that what we teach and the ways in which we teach it could be different – and this is not intended to change what we do, but rather not to let us forget that it is signs that we deal with, and not with the unequivocal.

On the other hand, it also seems necessary – if we really want to stand up to the almost inapplicable identification produced algorithmically – to give up the supposedly total control over what students do. To some extent, we need to open our classes to an experience of the “ordinary.” Due to deadlines and targets, to what we know will be required in the assessments (often prepared in contexts completely alien to our own classroom), it is not uncommon for us to look for ways to eliminate chance, the unpredictable. We do not ask questions so as not to waste time; if we do, we anticipate answers, sometimes even imitating the voice of an imaginary student; we mutilate texts, videos and, moreover, fix their meanings. Knowledge, in these cases, is privatized, it is in a sacred place where the students’ hands cannot touch it – and, therefore, the students’ minds and hearts cannot be touched by this knowledge either. If the world does not open, the self closes in on itself, remains what it already is outside of school.

This is why we insist here on the importance of “teaching” – not from a specific methodological perspective, but in a somewhat epistemological sense. Placing signs on the world, marking it in one way and not another, disputing these markings and not losing sight of where they come from, where they come from us, is what characterizes a human way of inhabiting reality, and because it is human, it is open, inconclusive, erratic. Because it is still human, still inviting deviations from the inertial path of a “self” detected and captured algorithmically; inviting, perhaps, the perception of a common, multiple world. Because it is human, it is profane, since it is no longer a matter of what is restricted to the gods – be they the traditional ones or the contemporary big techs – and their decisions about what is up to each one of us. And, because it is profane, it is finally capable of accepting suspension and bifurcation.

Final Considerations

This article has sought to speculate on a possible clash: that of subjectivity conditioned by the algorithmic functioning of contemporary communication networks with the possibility of the school welcoming subjective unfinishedness and the common. In addition, in a reflective exercise, we look at what the

etymology of the verb “to teach” offers us as a powerful way of confronting digital one-dimensionality from inside the classroom.

In this sense, the article is organized into three different parts. We began by using the notions of “suspension” and “profanation” presented by Masschelein and Simons (2014b) as characteristics of what “school” is. Our intention with this was to think of the school as a space that could possibly be organized around welcoming and encouraging children and young people to experiment with roles other than those that are socially and domestically expected from them. In addition, these notions proposed by the authors also allowed us to think of the school institution as a place of the “common”: knowledge, objects, and reflections that, outside of it, might be restricted, sacralized, and can be explored safely and freely within it.

These characteristics, by contrast, led us, in a second moment, to two expressions coined by communicologist Fernanda Bruno to characterize the effects of digital algorithms: the “kidnapping of the future” and the “confiscation of the common.” Based on a non-exhaustive literature review, we developed the ways in which virtual filters operate, which are organized, on the one hand, by personalizing the world experienced by the user and, on the other, by forming profiles which, to meet the business system on which digital platforms are based, seek to predict, and condition individual performances.

From this clash, we finally come to the defense of teaching. Starting from the etymology of the term, which refers to *insignare*, “to place signs,” we tried to think through the inferences we made from this etymology to find lines of action for teachers interested in confronting the algorithmic subjectivity produced on the networks. Taking them seriously, it seems to us, is of no small importance in the context in which we live: the threats that democracy has been facing with the circulation of fake-news and the intensification of ideological bubbles, for example, are not uncommon – phenomena that are closely linked to operating regimes in the virtual sphere. The challenge, however, does not seem impossible to us either, but to face it, it seems unavoidable that we, as teachers, from within our classrooms, dare to make use of a revolutionary technology: teaching.

It is in what the gesture of teaching carries within it that we feel the possibility of inferring an education capable of confronting algorithmic functioning lies. To teach is to place signs, symbols, on the world; the world that is taught,

therefore, is not an unequivocal world, but a world that is humanly signified, humanly constructed. A symbol, however, only emerges as necessary when there is a disposition to the other – someone who lived completely and forever apart from the human world would not need to communicate anything to anyone, after all. To teach, then, is to recognize one's inventive capacity and make oneself available to the other, to invent together. It means recognizing the polysemy of what exists and, in some way, being able to choose and take responsibility for what you bring into the classroom. It is reclaiming the shared, because it is only there that signs and symbols can exist; it is betting that what is given – and who is given – is not definitive, but is open to questioning and problematization. It is reclaiming the future as an invention; it is reclaiming the common as a condition.

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