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## **The alpha and omega of living together: humanism and the modernisation of higher education**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the historic reasons and good practices of teaching and learning citizenship in response to the challenges faced by today's society in the meeting of cultures and sharing of knowledge. Concepts of peace, interculturality, and active citizenship are examined and possibilities for the modernisation of teaching in higher education are presented. The article considers the validity of Humanism (alpha point) as a pedagogical theory from which innovation (omega point) originates. The core of the educational mission remains that of learning to live together; hence, good practices are proposed for improving the quality of higher education. Central to this is effective transition from theory to practice, conducted through a symbolic interactionism approach. The paper also refers to results from qualitative research carried out in Italian primary schools on the impact of the preparation of teachers for teaching in multi-faith classes, particularly in contexts of social emergency, such as in Lampedusa.*

**Keywords:** *humanism, modernisation, interculture, qualitative research, ethno-methodology*

### **Introduction**

In his essay on education (1529), Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote that the most dangerous thing for man is irrationality. Arguing that there is nothing he can grasp more easily than virtue and nothing he will learn to detest more easily than irrationality. It is not nature that teaches good behaviour, but instruction, and unlearning is more difficult than learning. Moreover, it is unfortunate that parents entrust their children to teachers, from whom they learn things that must then be unlearned! Erasmus's defining dictums have not lost their sense of criticism of adults who neglect education and take no interest in their responsibility towards their children and hence the state and God. This introduces the subject of educating for peace, a subject dear to Erasmus who, having been summoned to speak out about religious and political conflicts, gave verbal testimony that man is able and should speak to everyone and place himself above all borders. The ideal of a humanism of encounter, without war, is that of religion without fanaticism and politics without intolerance. Peace becomes a possible achievement when dialogue follows the path laid out by Erasmus: better an unjust peace than a just war.

### **Redirecting science and technology**

After the second world, peace education took on an especially important value, but this was paralleled by the rise in the destructive force of weaponry. On economic and

military levels, the destructive potential of some dominant countries highlighted the dependent situation of less wealthy countries that were prevented from competing on the same terms. The cliché of the North and South of the world continues to act as a separation, not only economic and political, but also cultural. The Polish educator, Bogdan Suchodolski (1993, p. 45), describes the problem of education to peace from the standpoint of the causes and mentalities that produce war and peace. Among the objective causes to be mentioned are situations of dominance or threat that trigger conflicts, tension, aggression, injustices, inequalities of resource distribution, minority discrimination and conditions of inferiority. One might say an overall quality of life that does not meet a person's expectations. From a point of view of mentality, reference is made to problems of the formation of awareness and the duty to assure that attitudes of understanding, solidarity, and overcoming a feeling of superiority are encouraged, and the latter of which may lead a person to dominate another person. While the intervention on the causes chiefly involves politicians and economists, the intervention on forming open, flexible mentalities involves educators. On the basis of the logic of the interdependence of contexts and the elements that make up the contexts, one sees that the duties of politicians, economists and educators are interlinked. The political actions intended to overcome social injustices and the economic programmes aimed at raising the income level of the poorer brackets have positive repercussions on the conditions of peace in a country. On the other hand, activities intended to shape awareness and promote humane attitudes that inspire towards goodwill and living together contribute towards people living in peace and afford a sense of safety and tranquillity, from which the social wellbeing and economy of the population arises. Life must be steered in a different manner, so that the development of science and technology is not synonymous with the threat of man on earth and results in the effective, balanced use of resources. Ideologies that claim the superiority of one nation over another, of one culture over another, that are believed to be the guardians of a world mission, also produce destructive effects on relations between nations and the peaceful encounter of the populations and individual persons. Courageous replies, full of humanity, are those which, since the Age of Enlightenment, have become the domain of Europe and the entire world. The conviction that men are identical and equal on all continents is at the basis of dialogue and brotherhood. It would not be possible to build up a world order on a human scale without this conviction.

### **The defence of peace**

To resolve conflicts during situations of war and support civil coexistence, Swee-Hin Toh (2002), who won the UNESCO prize for education to peace, proposes the holistic paradigm, according to which it is necessary to encourage the active, democratic participation of every person, so that everyone can contribute and remove the causes of conflicts. The effectiveness of the interventions is interdependent on resource distribution during specific crisis situations. Political actions for environmental sustainability, recognition of the structural roots of social injustice and overcoming disputes between rival factions inside and outside the same country are the most immediate objectives for governments that are facing problems of education to peace, hereby taking into consideration the real living situation of the people. It is not enough to negotiate among the States, neither are peace treaties enough; it is necessary to actively

oppose plans of ecological destruction, support the weaker brackets of the population, and promote policies of domestic and global convergence for the common good. In Toh's words, the four principle keys towards promoting the culture of peace can be found in a holistic education, teaching to values, prepared towards dialogue and a critical viewpoint. Here, holism means a multidimensional opening to situations of conflict that require complex and conditional analyses. Requirements for a positive future, in terms of values, are respect for others, empathy and understanding the fact that individuals and groups may generate significant changes, respect for diversity and a commitment to justice, impartiality and non-violence. Special attention is to be paid to the value of reconciliation and intercultural and religious respect. Not to be forgotten are values such as compassion, forgiveness, interdependence, telling the truth, the feeling of reverence for life and solidarity with those who suffer and are ostracised as a person and a nation. Teachings about the resolution of human problems are found in the culture of Eastern wisdom that talks about minds full of love, friendship, passion and compassion towards human beings who open themselves to unknown, unexpected dimensions of knowledge. The dichotomy between 'Eastern' and 'Western' concepts must be overcome, by removing the idea that there is a culture of peace rooted in the conception of harmony in the East and a concept of 'fair war' in the West that claims to keep peace through the use of war. The concept to be disseminated is that everyone may learn from the wisdom that we can discover and communicate wherever it flourishes. The third pedagogic principle indicated in the dialogue refers to the capacity to present one's own reasons and open oneself to others, by expressing one's expectations and wishes. Thus, the dialogue is heard and allows for living with enthusiasm and establishing positive relations with others, that is, positive interaction and effective cooperation. The fourth pedagogic principle of the critical understanding of reality recalls, according to Toh, Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness or *conscientização*. Education to critical consciousness is the road towards transformation both in the sense of the commitment against prejudice, in favour of justice and human rights, and in the sense of reconciliation and respect for differences of faith. Teaching towards understanding the dynamics of political and economic power allow for the active participation in a new distribution of resources that is fairer and respects human rights. On a worldwide level, the balance of efforts directed at education to peace appears to be positive.

There were hopeful signs that the sharing of ideas and lessons of building and educating for a culture of peace is a fruitful experience. Hopefully, as dialogue continues through alternative ways of communication, and in other local and global spaces, the overall project of peace building and peace education will be enhanced and catalyzed, yielding more threads for weaving a culture of peace and nonviolence for all the peoples of the world (Toh, 2002, p. 93).

The discussion about the culture of peace becomes especially sensitive in a comparison between the theory of just war and Kant's theory of perpetual peace. Williams believes (2012) that Kant should be considered among the theoreticians who propose the building of peace through legal paths. Bowden (2011) is of the same opinion and questions the correlation between civilised societies and the propensity toward peace. Domestic and international studies show how, since ancient times, attempts have been made to build a direct relationship between civilisation and peace, until it is demonstrated that the

progress of science and technology has led to higher expectations of peace and also maintains these expectations on prophetic and utopian planes.

The kind of spiritual or moral arousal we are talking about here is effectively the wider adoption of what might best be characterized as Enlightenment values, principles, and institutions. These emerging liberal values and associated democratic procedures and institutions were increasingly thought of as underpinning and sustaining the ever more orderly and peaceful relations among the states of civilized Western international society. This general line of thinking has been around for some time, with the central argument being that there is a direct correlation between civilized society and a propensity for peacefulness, both in domestic affairs and in international relations. (Bowden, 2011, p. 2)

However, other studies show exactly the same correlation between civilisation and war. The most advanced societies have produced more war than peace. In fact, wars require discipline, cooperation, technology and science and one can confirm that States use war as justification for defending their own democracy. The high degree of human ingenuity is expressed in research about peace as much as research about war. Bowen's analysis leads one to understand how the pursuit of peace is a human quest which cannot be eliminated and, like the combination of civilised society and war, is not necessarily successful. Free democratic societies of the twentieth century would not have kept their standards of progress as high, without an idea of peace as a commonly accepted international order.

The main idea that we have discussed until now is that of peace as an indispensable condition for developing the person and modern States. The commitment to make peace a constant objective envelops the educational plan for a humanism, in which European tradition recognises its historic and cultural roots. We believe that the project for modernising the higher education of the person, as a whole, is inserted into this basis. That is, a person who learns to make knowledge a tool for living together in peace.

In short, global competitiveness and global cooperativeness are core aims for teaching and learning which aim to equip students for peaceful and healthy lives in the 21st century. For our higher education institutions, that means that 'Internationalisation' – which has long been seen as a 'luxury add-on' – must move into the very centre of the university or college strategy and development. At the same time, the definition of 'internationalisation' which has often been limited to the recruitment of international students, must be extended into a new holistic approach, where its impact on the overall quality of programmes and graduates is reflected in the globally interconnected and intercultural learning outcomes. In practice, this means student and staff mobility (incoming and outgoing), the international dimension of curricula, the internationalisation of the campus, a positive and efficient approach to foreign language learning, transnational delivery of courses and degrees (offshore branches, distance education, MOOCs), international networks, alliances and partnerships and so forth. This should be put together to form an explicit 'Internationalisation Strategy' of universities and colleges, which in turn, must be an integral part of the overall mission and strategy of the individual higher education institution. (Vassiliou, 2013, p. 50)

### **Modernisation to meet to the social crisis**

The report concerning the modernisation of higher education, sent by the High Level Group to the European Commission in June 2013, appreciates the considerable advances reached and indicates the paths to be followed to satisfactorily meet the challenges posed in the European agenda and the economic and social crisis we are experiencing. The year 2020 is expected to see 40% of European youth getting a university degree. To this end, it is necessary to raise the quality of teaching and learning so as to prepare young people to flexibly and competently face the situations of the unforeseeable labour market. The main concern is that of intervening in curriculums and updating knowledge and skills. Spoken of is knowledge so globally connected as to be able to be used on the labour market and be the platform for continuous learning. New investments and substantial resources must be earmarked for the professionalism of the teachers, who see, among their tasks, the upgrading of the methods to communicate scientific knowledge, even if the heart of the problem remains that of placing people into conditions of learning and creating opportunities for this to be achieved.

Universities and higher education institutions, as part of the education system, should not educate students only in narrow, knowledge-based specialisations, but must go further, seeking the integral education of the person. They should consider offering students transversal majors or areas of specialisation. This perspective sees students themselves realising that they need to acquire broader knowledge and skills. (Vassiliou, 2013, p. 36).

Within the context of modernisation of higher education, a teacher par excellence is defined as follows:

An excellent teacher can enhance creative skills and learning outcomes such as: complex thinking – problem solving, reciprocal learning, experiential learning; social skills and participatory learning – interaction with tutors and other learners, active participation in learning, interdependence; and personal shaping of knowledge – progressive mastery, individual pacing, self-correction, critical reflection, active seeking of meaning, empowered self-direction, internal drive/motivation. (Vassiliou, 2013, p. 36).

### **Making the university a place of knowledge, research and innovation**

The humanistic philosophy of teaching and the concept of active participation in learning find in the ethnomethodology the proper way to render the university an environment of knowledge, research and innovation. We will describe the process followed in this sense and will demonstrate the relevance of: a) humanistic understanding of others; b) preparing university as place of knowledge experienced; c) investigating intercultural contexts.

In the humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam it can be underlined how the reasons for peace education are related to the intercultural issue. Value training, such as mutual respect, is a democratic response to everyone's human needs. More specifically, it is a

response to situations in which possible conflicts are detected as a result of the difference between the wish for active participation and the real possibilities of becoming part of a community, the integration into which sometimes requires lengthy times for acceptance. The meeting of different cultures is created through the communication of values that find the right environment for manifesting themselves in school; children are introduced to knowledge about the personal and group histories through which behaviours of mutual respect, attention to others and education to human solidarity are fostered. Teachers who have experiences of interculture and international education within their university training and combine this experience with the methodological innovation offered by the course teacher show a higher degree of satisfaction in their studies, participate with enthusiasm and steer their learning towards preparation for their teaching role at school. The appreciation of studying increases when students participate in methodological decisions, know the course route and are successful in test evaluations and become actors in school investigation.

In order to know where intercultural education in Italian primary schools stands today, a short survey was recently taken jointly with university students attending the degree course in Primary Education Sciences. The survey had ten objectives combining professional culture and preparation to work in schools as teachers.

1. Topics were presented in the classroom, encouraging the opening up of dialogue with the world outside the university, specifically national situations, with respect to which intercultural questions were necessarily faced. For example, the landing of children at Lampedusa and their placement in the island schools has had to be confronted. This objective formed part of the theory that examined the school-world relationship, according to the *experimental method of education of the Italian Pizzigoni's Renewed School*.
2. Topics were presented in the classroom, encouraging the opening up of dialogue with the world outside the university, specifically international situations. On an international level, colleagues from other institutions of higher learning and universities in Cyprus and Portugal were asked to come to the classroom to compare concepts and practices of interculture in Europe. This objective formed part of the theory that examined the preparation of courses of *international pedagogy at university*.
3. The opportunity to integrate theoretical studies with field experience by submitting a short, open-response questionnaire was offered to school teachers. This objective formed part of the theory that examined the relationship of *theory and practices in teaching and learning processes*.
4. It was relevant to have students come into direct contact with the intercultural experienced at school and related by the teachers, therefore supporting the exchange between school and university, and between active teachers and teachers in training.

This objective formed part of the theory that examined the *professional and intergenerational communication* among teachers.

5. Positive interaction was developed within the group both inside and outside the classroom by applying the M.I.T.E. method - Multiple Interaction Team Education. This objective formed part of the theory that examined *symbolic interactionism* as a time of having experience of significant, cultural symbols and values and exchange them within the group.
6. The students were given the chance to directly experience the qualitative research methodology, in both an initial and exploratory stage of application. This objective formed part of the theory that examined the one that Dewey calls inquiry-based learning, that is, *learning by doing*.
7. Debate in the classroom was encouraged before, during and after the interviews with the teachers. The replies were compared to what could be deduced from a relevant, widespread part of the literature on intercultural education in Italy during the period of 1992-2013. This objective formed part of the comparative theory of *problem approach*.
8. The plan was to steer the study and research towards the intersection of peace and intercultural topics and organise the contents of the teachers' responses; understood from the first surveys was how they were combining educational actions in the commitment of schools to encourage education based on building up a society in which people can have experience of living together well. This objective formed part of the theory of training to *critical thinking*.
9. To organise the formative itinerary within a *logical thought structure*, by articulating pedagogical theory and methodology of research, going from project to project i.e. from the research about earthquake in Emilia Romagna (2012) to the research about Lampedusa shipwreck (2013).
10. To produce a written text, both autonomous and personal, stating the matter studied and the results of the survey. This objective formed part of the theory of the *development of personal creativity*.

### **The foundation of intercultural school**

The replies to the questions, with which the students opened the dialogue with the teachers, allows us to know the status of the works on interculture and understand the directional trends towards which Italian schools are moving. Proof of this is mainly concentrated in the unanimous agreement about the value of intercultural education in order to face the crisis situation we, in Italy, are experiencing as well as with respect to the disembarkations on the island of Lampedusa. Interculture encompasses the fields of

epistemology, semantics and vocabulary that justify and legitimise actions deemed essential for educating to peace, respect for human rights, democratic coexistence, social justice and understanding the value and uniqueness of each human being. These are values and behaviours that represent aims, also utopic, that must necessarily be embodied in all school programs. Many teachers state that a school year should include at least one intercultural experience, preferably with the collaboration of the school and families (*Interview 42*). Although in the minds and words of the teachers great attention is paid to interculture, antinomies are also revealed with regard to the relationship with the educational institution and comparison with social reality, in which there are new signs of racism and intolerance (*Interview 25*). Educational institutions are accused of not sufficiently supporting intercultural initiatives and leaving teachers the task of undertaking personal paths. As regards social contradictions, teachers understand that school is a happy island, where the wish is to feel well together and there is a commitment to achieve this. On the contrary, society is showing signs of desperation, abandonment and negligence that schools must know how to redirect by looking for positive things, convince students that there is a possible alternative and organise times of encounter and getting to know others, through activities of learning to live together (*Interview 58*). An 11-year-old child in a school on the island of Lampedusa drew clouds that were ‘raining tears of blood’ and the sun with a sad, yellow face because ‘here on Lampedusa, the sun is usually always happy’. The school director says, ‘Immigration is a red line that ties together all of our teaching activities. Children live with the disembarkations. They are prepared towards acceptance and solidarity and have open minds. How else could it be when they see their mothers who take off their shoes and give them to the African women, arriving on the boats and walking barefoot?’ (*Interview 24*). The greatest challenge would seem to be what schools face, being placed at the centre of pressing requirements of efficiency, for which there are no concrete possibilities of realising good intentions and with the serious risk of slipping into the standardisation of cultures, because ‘levelling out diversity makes everything easier’ (*Interview 64*). The teachers internalised: a) that they are managing the emergency both with and without resources (*Interview 1*); b) that they are educating the children of non-Italian cultures towards integration and children of the Italian culture towards acceptance; c) that there is no ‘foreign’ child at school (*Interview 59*) or ‘uncomfortable immigrant pupil’ (*Interview 60*); d) that art and science are cultures to be discovered in the traditions encountered in one’s daily life and not repetitions of lifeless documents; e) that the mastery of a language builds up cultural identity and permits the full exercise of active citizenship (*Interview 41*); and f) that, in interculture, tangible values are expressed as cultural symbols and intangible values as ‘freedom to live’ (*Interview 9*).

## Conclusions

Having identified the alpha and omega of living together in the two processes of humanism and modernisation, it is possible to contemplate the relevance of the European cultural tradition that, from Erasmus of Rotterdam to Kant, was expanded beyond European borders and then returned to Europe with new motivation for education to peace and democracy. The crises that modern society is experiencing require new competences regarding both teachers’ qualifications and the preparation of young people. The plans for reform invest in university training that renews its investment in

persons and resources, art, science and technology. To attempt to insert our research into this path, we updated the pedagogic theory in a qualitative study on interculture and investigate the presence of humanism through ethnomethodology (Merino, 2013, pp. 174-175). The results emphasise the realisation of good practices in primary schools by teachers, who make interculture the most effective route to educate to peace and active citizenship within three school contexts: emergency, multiculturalism and participation. Emergency in situations in which masses of children of migrant families are arriving; multiculturalism in situations in which several cultures and languages are noted in a single classroom; participation in situations in which the migratory experience of the family lies far behind, the children have been born in Italy and are an integral part of the Italian society. In the experiences examined, the teachers implicitly refer to values that can be found in humanism as much as in the trust in education and the tirelessness in the search for happiness, while demonstrating being able to place themselves well within the European recommendations that are called upon to carry out the research within the context of life and ethnomethodology is added as a driving force, so as to raise the quality of teaching and learning.

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