Conferences

# Teaching work, analysis of activity and the role of the subject

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, sociologists have turned their attentions to the work of the teacher. In doing so they have applied categories borrowed from another field of sociology, that of employment. This approach found its justification in internal evolutions in the field of sociology, but also in some significant social changes. We may recall the rejection of structuro-functionalism and the exhaustion of the critical paradigm of reproduction, both deemed over-determinist and self-enclosed, and the appeal for researchers to penetrate the secrets of what in those days was called the "black box" of the school (and of the classroom), and take a closer and more open look at work dynamics and their constructions by the actor in situ. System-based approaches, which were pertinent to the development of technocratic theory and practice as blueprints for major educational projects faced with the pains of growth and democratization, then gave way to institutional— and organizational-based approaches and to the analysis of the logic guiding local action.

In this perspective, teachers and administrators ceased being the agents of an all-powerful system, accomplishing functions and purposes which surpass them, and whose unexpected effects they were only vaguely aware of. They became actors endowed with social and cognitive resources, members of systems of action which conceded them a relative autonomy, armed with tools of work which were either collectively institutionalized or individually improvised, and confronted with working situations which, like all working situations, challenged them individually and collectively, and to which they had to adapt. No longer the "cultural idiots" but equipped with a conscience that was both discursive and practical (Giddens, 1987), teachers and administrators now emerged as the central players in the mission of the institution to which they belonged, those who in the last analysis would reveal to observers the true nature of this mission, its pros and cons and ins and outs. Noting the ambiguity and the general character of the finalities of education, even, indeed, the "loose coupling" (Weick, 1976) of the links that held the education system together, sociologists agreed that it was impossible to really know what schools accomplished except by observing the real working context of its actors "on the ground" (those designated by Lipsky (1985) as the "street-level bureaucrats") and dialoguing with them on what they accomplished, what they attempted to do with their students, what they couldn't do although they wanted to, or what they chose not to do for reasons which became clear during the course of the dialogue with the researcher.

What I'd like to do in this article is provide a brief overview of recent research on teaching work from this "ground level" perspective (Bidet, 2006). I do not mean this overview to be exhaustive. It is selective, and interdisciplinary. It addresses research in terms of the status its accords to the subject and to the action. For a sociologist, this is not usual procedure, as the subject tends to be drowned or diluted in the broader social context. I attempt to take on board contributions from other disciplines and other perspectives, for the closer we draw to the subject and his activity the more disciplines other than sociology must be taken into account. Work is a multidimensional object which requires interdisciplinary approaches. In other words, sociology does not have an answer to everything, and it is in the interest of sociology to dialogue with other disciplines, especially those which reject an atomistic view of the individual and which seek to take into account social factors (such as historic and cultural psychology, situated cognition and other trends I will mention in due course).

## ACTIVITY / WORK IN PROGRESS AND THE ACTING SUBJECT

The French-speaking ergonomists were the first to make a breakthrough to an activity-centred approach. These ergonomists (Leplat, 1991) studied the disparity between work as prescribed and real activity, and looked in this disparity for an individual and collective subject at work. This stress on activity is not restricted either to ergonomics or to France. It brings together theoretical and methodological developments from historico-cultural psychology, the psychology of work and a clinical approach to activity, from the ethno-methodological traditions already well-established in the United States, from situated cognition (Lave, 1988) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and from pragmatic trends in linguistics. Within this cloud of theory and methodology, researchers dialogue and attempt to formulate a perspective which places the emphasis on "real" work, work as an investment of the actor's subjectivity and as the link between the subject and the situation. This rich and varied nebula attempts to comprehend the deeds and the words of the actors in real situations, in the presence of others and in articulation with a normative intentionality which takes form in action — and is not given in advance by the context. It provides the image of a singular actor faced with the contingencies of action, the uncertainty and ambiguity of situations, improvising fragile and unsteady balancing acts, discovering what his path is by walking it. It reveals how "extraordinary" and intelligent the accomplishment of everyday work is, even if it implicitly strengthens a rather conservative view of the job, or at least one which is difficult to develop or transform from "the outside", without passing through "the inside" revealed by the analysis of activity co-constructed by the actors on an everyday basis.

Barbier and Durand present 7 elements where these currents converge, characteristic of what they call activity-based insertion (2003, p. 103):

1) a holistic conception of the activity which is predicated on the inseparability of action, cognition and emotion;
2) a situated conception of activity, centred on local interaction and situations, which grants the actors considerable room for manoeuvre and which insists on the specificity of knowledge and reasoning in accordance with the contexts;
3) an "embodied" conception of activity, that of a body which inhabits and moves in a physical context;
4) affirmation of the continuity and temporality of the activity, which is expressed via a "constructivist position (Le Moigne, 2001), a definition of individual activity as fundamentally social (…), a developmental view of activity (Clot, 1999), an insistence on analysing activity in its uninterrupted state, and not spatio-temporal contexts extrinsically delimited by stimuli or tasks" (Theureau, 1992);
5) affirmation of the negotiated character of social activity (in terms of concepts of co-determination and co-construction of meaning in language-based activity);
6) interest in the phenomena of autonomy of activity, which moreover may account for its improvised, inchoate, innovative, creative nature;
7) interest in the construction of meaning within the activity, notably manifest in the centring on narrative processes and the elucidation of the lived experience of the actors.

Let's examine the principal theoretical tenets of this activity-based insertion.

1) The centration on activity is important, in fact fundamental. In the professional act, we accord it a decisive place: it's this centration which makes a profession live and allows it to evolve, it's in this centration that the role of the subject finds expression, and it's thanks to this centration that action is effective and suited to its situation. If this centration was first examined in relation to the task or the prescription, it was to show that real work is the accomplishment of a subject in a situation which always exceeds the bounds of the prescription. Activity can never be reduced to the mere execution of the task: it has an adaptive, creative dimension. This is what makes the advocates of the analysis of real work argue that there is more in the activity than in the prescribed task. And this "more" has much to do with the subject, individual and collective, and what he puts of himself into his work. If at the outset it was important to show the disparity between prescribed and real work, more recent research on this aspect has been almost exclusively centred on the analysis of the activity, with the prescription no more than one point of reference among others.

2) Conceived in this way, activity is organized in the form of a coupling between the acting subject and the situation which provides resources and imposes constraints. Activity has a significant cognitive component: the cognizant subject defines the situation in the light of the contextual data, and this definition in some way affects the activity. This, to use the terminology of Lave, is how an "arena" becomes a "setting", a context becomes a situation — and the activity is inseparable from the latter. The situation influences the progress of the activity at the same time as the activity modifies the situation.

This cognition is situated, as Lave (1988) showed in her remarkable book on the "natural" mathematical thinking of American women, who were set mathematical tasks in different environments — a test in a classroom,

buying the groceries in a supermarket, and attending a Weight Watchers session. The women performed mathematical calculations in different situations, using the tools which each situation makes available to them.

Subject and situation are posed simultaneously, but distinctly. In this regard, the metaphor of the helmsman employed by Clot (1998, p. 149) is extremely suggestive. The helmsman acts, does nothing but act, and in acting he modifies the situation. External forces — wind and tides — are real and terribly "efficient". To sail on the sea therefore requires the helmsman to enter this marine world and find his way in it. His yacht and the elements which comprise it, his charts and his knowledge, are his tools: they are given to him by the culture, and at the same time he uses them, adapting and modifying them as the situation requires. The helmsman defines the situation, determines his conduct and that of his yacht, seeks to outwit the elements and "puts them to the test", i.e. measures their "reality", their strength, movement and effects. In this metaphor, "the helmsman does not *undergo* his situation. He even contributes to its definition. Therefore, neither is he the "master of his initiatives" (1998, p. 154). His action is always, invariably, anchored in a situation. It cannot be detached from this situation or viewed outside of it. That would be an anthropological absurdity.

3) The subject cannot help but be a cognizant one: he has feelings, emotions. In other words, action, cognition and emotion are inseparable. Numerous studies on teacher malaise and the work aversion disorder have revealed not only the importance of the rapport with the job and its problematic character, but also the variety of individual responses to this malaise and this aversion. Teaching work is an "emotional labour", granted, in the sense that the teacher manages the emotions expressed in class in the pedagogical relationship and in the rapport of students with the learning tasks set them and their evaluation. But teaching also requires additional investment on the part of the teacher, an investment which in one of these socially-valued forms conjures up the image and the model of the "passionate" teacher who like nobody else invests himself in an effort to mobilize his students. And then teaching produces positive or negative emotions in the teacher. So some emotions are not only invested in the job but at the same time are generated by it.

We could cite research of a psychoanalytical nature in defence of this position here. I would prefer not to: it appears to address the situation of teaching as the arena of a contest or a drama whose sources lie elsewhere, in personal history, in the unconsciousness of the one and the other: in short, in an ensemble of forces, tensions and conflicts which the actors bring from the exterior but which are not specific to the situation. In this sense they speak little or not at all of teaching, rather of what is at stake in teaching but is not intrinsic to it. Granted, subjectivity is recognized and present, but it is seen in terms of categories which transcend the situation and which see the latter as an epiphenomenon or at best as the trigger of a dynamic whose logic surpasses teaching. In activity-based insertion, we remain firmly in the situation and the subject-situation coupling.

Hélou and Lantheaume (2008) adopt a perspective informed both by pragmatic sociology (Nachi, 2006) and by the "clinic of activity" of Clot (1998), and insist on the everyday difficulties of the teacher's job, which in their view are proper to all teaching contexts and situations. These contexts are not exceptional, like those faced by people less well-adjusted to the situation or involved in certain extreme situations. They are, rather, an integral part of the profession. Their research led them to identify three such cases, cited by teachers themselves: 1) the difficulty in mobilizing students who resist the influence of the school, of learning and of the teacher, and in getting them involved in learning activities; 2) the difficulty in separating personal and professional life, the constant pressure of work, its invasive nature and the difficulty in setting a limit on how much of himself the teacher is prepared to invest in his work; and 3) the individual and collective difficulty in defining what constitutes "good" work. In the latter case, to arrive at definition of "good" work would require that teachers devote time and commitment to professional debate, for this definition has to be formulated and promoted by the professional collective. According to these researchers, neither one condition nor the other exists at present, and this vacuum leaves teachers in a vulnerable state characterized by a defensive individualism which is poorly adapted to the current trials of the profession.

For Hélou and Lantheaume, "everything is a question of managing the everyday difficulties of the job, of foreseeing their emergence, their resolution" (2008, p. 71). Some teachers opt for an attitude of detachment, of relativization and disengagement, i.e. a withdrawal from their work; others, on the contrary, invest even more in one aspect of their work (teaching per se, institutional life, discipline, union activities) in an attempt to find some pleasure in their work or to escape the source of their suffering. Hélou and Lantheaume take up the famous categories of Hirschman: "exit", "loyalty" and "voice" (1983). Their research follows that of Robitaille and Maheu (1993) on teachers in the CEGEPs (colleges of general and vocational education) of Quebec and which, based on the rapport with the user, identified three professional identities: withdrawal, independence and ambivalence.

Hélou and Lantheaume add a fourth identity, adaptation, i.e. the ability of teachers to "adapt the rules, get round them, relativize them, find loopholes in them (…) to produce an alternative rule, which is to say ne-

gotiate situations and norms from a pragmatic perspective which allows them to endure in their profession by reconciling pleasure and interest" (2008, p. 75). A "posture of resistance" would see the light of day, they argue, "when the actors neither engage themselves with the situation, nor detach themselves from it, nor equip themselves with a critical apparatus for changing the situation, but transform it in a practical manner by endlessly renegotiating it in reality. They will then succeed in producing an alternative or quasi-alternative reality relative to that constructed in discourse of justification, their own included" (2008, p. 76).

Lantheaume (2007) has recently explored in greater depth this form of adaptation which is manifest in a creative and ingenious adjustment to the situation, which she examines in the light of the notion of guile. While acknowledging that there is guile and guile, i.e. some adaptations are more successful than others, she views guile as the personal ability to get oneself out of a sticky situation, as a productive tension associated with the confrontation between the commitment of the person and the dynamic of the job and the institution, which can sometimes — but not always — ensure the development of the person and the efficacy of his work. A form of practical intelligence, guile is a way of dealing with the unexpected. As a transgression of rules and prescriptions, where it succeeds it allows teachers to make the situation hold and perform their professional activity. Which takes us further from survival (Woods, 1977) or saving face (Goffman, 1961).

Interestingly, Lantheaume maintains that even if in general guile is a form of individual engagement with work, particular to each teacher, if it becomes public and stable (via informal exchange among teachers, or as part of the analysis of the activity), it not only helps develop individual activity but also nourishes the profession and can perhaps (but how?) even become one of the assets of the profession.

4) The subject rarely acts alone — he or she is involved in rapports of interdependence with others. Together, they are engaged in the construction of a world which has meaning for them. The activity of the subject rests always on a process of construction or attribution of meanings, negotiation and provisional objects of agreement. The construction of these meanings is an act of knowledge, for the latter is a form of adapting to the world, which is to say an action on the world. Pastré (2007) advances the idea of "concepts in acts" or "pragmatic concepts", which for example allow a teacher to see, interpret and diagnose the situation he finds himself in. Pastré echoes Vygotski's distinction between "daily" concepts (deriving from everyday experience) and "scientific" concepts, although he is only interested in the former. As Samurçay and Vergnaud (2000) emphasize: "A teacher often improvises and cannot have experience of all the circumstances which may arise; then again, he is often not capable of giving names to the recurrent phenomena, even if he reacts to them in an adapted manner. The operatory form of knowledge is always richer and more subtle than the predicative, in the abilities of the teacher as in those of others" (pp. 59-60). Perhaps the operatory form of knowledge is sufficient for ensuring reasonably efficient action in a given situation, but it risks imprisoning the subject in his experience and allows him little room for developing his activity. This is the reason Vygostski insisted on the need for dialogue and comparison between "everyday" and scientific concepts, and this is something that the "clinic of activity" or other forms of analysis or articulation of experience allow — a dialogue and comparison which may, in certain conditions, develop both experience and its scientific representation.

5) In a situation where several actors are present and interacting, as in a classroom, the interaction between these actors results in collective action. Casalfiore, Bertone and Durand (2003), writing on sequences of teaching, envisaged the teaching activity as the articulation of the activities of teachers and students; and they observe that this articulation rests on a permanent negotiation, implicit or explicit, which gives rise to provisional agreements, endlessly renewed, constructed by teachers and students. Equilibrium in the classroom is a fragile and singular thing, a product of the co-constructed situation and a testimony to its relative autonomy and its specificity. According to these authors, classroom activity improves in being seized as a dynamic and emergent course of action, not totally premeditated but coming into being in the negotiation of articulation.

6) In this way we can understand the importance and pertinence of the study of verbal exchanges in the classroom, as a medium for the construction of meanings and agreements, the discourse and verbalizations of the actors. In this regard, Pinsky stresses that what interests the researcher is what in the activity is significant for the actor(s), i.e. what is "relatable and commentable by him or them at any moment" (1993, p. 107). Action may be voiced, including and perhaps above all in a private discourse, in the first person, accompanying and interpreting the action. For the researcher, the utterances which comprise this discourse are not "verifiable": there is no reality behind the utterance, accessible to the researcher as a point of reference. There are only more or less sincere utterances, i.e. more or less in conformity with the experience of the actor. The only judge of the degree of conformity is the actor himself.

Verbal exchanges in the classroom construct a common "text" comprising a relational and conceptual "plot" (i.e. a logical sequence of articulated events), hatched by the interlocutors and giving a purpose to learning, an

"episode", or ensemble of exchanges during which the interlocutors speak of the same thing (for example a task, an instruction, a skill) and of the micro-adjustments of each of the interlocutors (Vinatier, 2007, p. 37).

7) Veyrunes, Gal-Petitfaux and Durand (2007) have advanced the concept of "social configurations" produced by collective activity in the classroom and incorporating the concerns of the actors in a particular manner. These relate to emerging processes of sharing and dynamic balancing of the tensions attendant upon the different preoccupations of the actors. They belong to the universe of the possibilities of actualization of the essential preoccupations of teachers, those which characterize the teaching profession: maintaining order in the classroom, getting the students to work, making them learn. The same holds for the preoccupations of the students: performing tasks, finding a place for oneself in the group, creating a good image, building an interest in learning. Between these two types of preoccupation there is a greater or lesser degree of convergence and tension and an endeavour for equilibrium and articulation.

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ACTIVITY-BASED PERSPECTIVES

In recognizing the situated character of the activity, this ground-level perspective accords a relative autonomy and singularity to the situations examined. Relative to the arguments of traditional perspectives centred on the political context and organization, this autonomy demarcates approaches centred on activity and is an important contribution that adds considerably more complexity to the study of the relationship between the various levels of analysis or scales of context. This perspective also accords more space to the subject.

It's difficult to see how we can make the move from the analysis of local individual-others-situation couplings to the collective and institutional. It's as if the institutional and the organizational were a neutral and distant niche for couplings or detached configurations, with no influence on them. But in fact there is a continuity in teaching work between, for example, work in the classroom and work outside the classroom, and the disciplinary or departmental (i.e. organizational) collective influences the rapport between teachers, their subject and the way they teach it. This is what McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) showed, taking communities of professional practice as an explanatory concept. So there are social, cultural and historical elements which influence classroom activity but which do not seem to be present in some of the research we have cited.

We might also question the ability of these currents of thought to explain change. Researchers have attempted to answer these important questions in various ways, but unfortunately not always with great success. Let's take a look at some of them.

Clot and Ruelland (2008) identify several simultaneous lives of the profession which make its development possible: there is the impersonal profession, embodied in the tasks prescribed by the organization and the institution; there is the profession which lives in every personal way of engaging with it, and equally between professionals in their dialogue; and there is the history and the memory of the profession, which they designate "transpersonal, for it does not belong to anyone, is a generic resource, available to all, transcending generations and even each individual professional" (2008, p. 52). Clot and Ruelland (2008) use these distinctions in an attempt to account for the different experiences of a maths teacher in a college and a secondary school. They interpret the different experiences, as felt and verbalized in self-confrontation, in terms of disharmony in the activity which places certain dimensions of the profession in opposition with one another. The profession is only really "living" and evolving if there are links between these dimensions which can facilitate the elaboration and the development of the activity. If we understand that conflictual ties prevent the development of the activity and create suffering at work, the conflict, if resolved at least individually and "interpersonally", i.e. in fruitful dialogues with immediate others (facilitated by the clinic of activity), enables the activity to unfold in the way the teacher wants it to. However, it's difficult to see how this integrates into the professional patrimony, or even how it can exist outside the consciousness of the subjects. Neither is it evident how the prescribed activity stands to gain, or even be affected by, this resolution of disharmony. Nevertheless, these distinctions are interesting, and they do provide tools for dynamizing and socializing the activity by enlarging the spheres of reference of action. Certain dimensions, however, must be made more operational.

In another text, Roger, Ruelland and Clot (2007) propose, in an endeavour to account for the evolution of the activity, a unit of analysis which is broader than the mere taking into account of real acts. The action realized does not wholly exhaust the activity. The latter is a "place of conflict between and within diverse poles to which he who acts addresses his activity" (2007, p. 134). For the teaching activity, conflict is structured across three poles: 1) the object of the job, i.e. "at one and the same time the skills, their articulation and the practices destined to ensure that the students appropriate them, the modes of rapport with oneself, with others and with the world that these practices entail for the students and which they are to be made to adopt" (2007, p. 134), 2) the activity of others on the same object (i.e. first the activity of the students, but also that of those who devise the programmes and textbooks, administrative and social

decision-makers, colleagues, the teaching hierarchy and parents etc.), and 3) the subject himself, his rapport with scientific, school and pedagogical skills, his rapport with the school and with society. Conflict is inevitable and the teacher must find a solution to these conflicts. In doing so, he has at his disposal the historic solutions contained in the memory of the profession and in what Clot calls the professional genre. This concept, borrowed from Bakhtine, is a "collective heritage, a fabric of support incorporated as a resource and a guarantor of personal activity and allowing the actor to answer in return for his profession" (2007, p. 135). This heritage is the product of "the history of the solutions which have collectively permitted us to overcome conflicts of activity, the accumulated stock of technical and symbolic ways of doing, fossilized in the history of a profession" (2007, p. 135).

By resolving on his own initiative the conflicts obtaining across these three poles of the activity (object, others and self), every teacher reactivates and recycles this heritage and gives a richer, more fitting life to the genre by the development of his own style. But Clot's use of this notion of genre remains, in my view, not very operatory, which makes it difficult to really explain the interactions between individual activity and pre-institutionalized collective references.

Roger, Ruelland and Clot (2007) conclude their analysis by underlining the importance of professional debate, and of the comparison of experiences in teaching collectives, if the profession is to adapt and evolve. But since neither of these factors are much in evidence, the management of conflicts and dilemmas is still largely an individual, unsocialized thing and it's difficult to see how the genre can be transformed by the evolution of the style of each teacher as an individual. Especially if, as we can justifiably think, the accumulated stock of technical and symbolic resources — formerly sustained by a strong and powerful institution — is hardly as plentiful as it once was, as Dubet (2002) rightly points out. In other words, if there are genres in crisis or in decay, how can they be useful for the evolution of the activity? How does a new genre come into being, in the current political and organizational context? If solutions are to be institutionalized, it isn't enough merely for individuals to share them. They have to be taken up by the institution and by its decision-makers. And then they have to be reworked to suit the activity and the style of their practitioners.

Nevertheless, the idea of conflict between different poles of activity, and the borrowing from Bakhtine of the notions of genre and style, gives food for thought. It reveals the role of the subject (his way of dealing with conflicts and his style). Also, the concepts of genre and style recall the importance of typification processes in social life and their usefulness in accounting for the stable or socialized forms which the subject can invest in and transform. But if they help us to understand the activity of the subject, they also pose some as-yet unresolved questions as to their own existence and dynamics.

The work of Saujat (2004) and Roustan and Saujat (unpublished) on inexperienced and beginner teachers follow this line of enquiry. However, while it's easy enough to see what novice teachers would have in common in terms of their own ways of integration in the profession, it's more difficult to see how this creates a stable professional genre in its own right, one which is incorporated in the memory of the profession and can thus serve as a point of reference for the novices. We rather get the feeling that novices muddle through as best they can and overcompensate because they are in survival mode. Which leads us to the classical analysis of professional socialization formulated by Lortie (1975) as an individual sink or swim ordeal, an emergency experienced in solitude.

We might also wonder about those arguments which place a premium on singularity, contingency and indeterminacy, and their ability to take on board the regularities, the structures and the invariables of work. Research into the "organizers" of teaching activity has intimated an interest in this question (see issue no. 56 of *Recherche et Formation*, 2007). These "organizers" of practice are defined in reference to the classical, systemic approach: in fact they refer to processes which endow a system with a structure and a mode of operation which articulate its different parts and engender, at one and the same time, certain regularities or stabilities and certain inter— and intra-individual differences. There are organizers of various orders on various levels which structure the rapport of the teacher with the context and institutional constraints, and organizers who are internal to the activity which structure its diverse elements (the task, the division of the teaching sequence), influencing the interactional dynamic co-constructed by teacher and students and the attitudes of students to learning. These organizers are not determinants or "causes" in the classical sense of the term; rather, they regulate activity in a situation which remains both structured and open, and where the teacher has — and must exercise — a certain discretion and judgement.

Often of didactic inspiration, or at the very least prepared to take into account the learning dimension, this research reveals the complexity of teaching, the multiple registers in which the teacher acts: for example, learning, and the relationship of the teacher and his students to learning, the pragmatic register (group management), the relational register (the place and commitment of each one) (Vinatier, 2007). Didactic action is jointly performed by teacher and students: it is the object of a contract, with reciprocal obligations, and a game of learning which has its own specific character: to win at this game, the student must on his own initiative develop certain strategies which the teacher expects of him, behave as the situation requires; the student must accept

to play the game of learning in the first person (to echo the expression of Sensevy, 2007, p. 20); didactic dialogue requires reticence on the part of the teacher (i.e. hiding part of what one knows) and the production of utterances whose goal is to lead the student to adopt the required behaviour "which he must in a certain way refrain from describing or unveiling (reticence)" (Sensevy 2007, p. 21). Therefore there are implicit conditions in this didactic contract, different from the conditions implicit in "natural" communication in the everyday world. The didactic contract is also based on a shared cognitive context, a common background resulting from what has previously been taught, necessary (to move the game of learning onwards), but insufficient (this insufficiency opening the way for new learning). Insufficiency can take an antagonistic form, requiring considerable work on accommodating the cognitive background.

With regard to didactic games, the teacher builds the game (preparation of activities) and has the students play the game. His professional conduct is organized around four structural actions: 1) defining the learning activity and putting in place didactic materials via instructions and their reformulations, 2) devolving, i.e., inciting the students to play the game on their own impetus, 3) regulating learning, which is at the heart of classroom activity, and 4) institutionalizing or, following the expression of Cordeiro and Schneuwly (2007, p. 78), constructing the didactic memory of the group over time. These principal categories of didactic action are the "organizers" of the activity. But for Sensevy and for Cordeiro and Schneuwly, they are not the only organizers: so are learning, the object of teaching itself, historically constituted and prefiguring the object constructed by the teacher and taught in class, and the hierarchical and sequential nature of teaching.

This research reaffirms the structured and shared character of classroom activity. It reveals the classroom as a relatively autonomous system of action where games of learning are structured and played. These games are specific and demarcate teaching from other activities and other jobs which involve interaction with others. So, for example, while in certain situations a nurse may act in a manner similar to a teacher in her efforts to modify the living habits of her patient, there is less reticence, less implicit obligation, in her communication with the patient. Granted, the patient has to consent to receive care and to learn new modes of behaviour — but he doesn't have to discover them for himself, nor demonstrate that he has understood on his own, without the help of the nurse: she tells him directly what he has to do. It's up to the patient to decide and act accordingly. Also, this research reminds us that knowing how to teach, the object of the job, has its own demands, specific character and history.

Sensevy (2007) insists on the need for "the description of teaching work to provide descriptors which reveal the constraints, of an institutional nature, which weigh on the teacher, that the institutions (in the anthropological sense of the term) are constituted by the hierarchies of inspectorial bodies, by the head of the establishment or the director of the school, by the collective of teaching colleagues, or the parents' association. To consider the classroom (…) as an institution (…) as a machine that produces cognitive, affective and perceptive categories, and thus a certain style of thinking (…) invites us to think that teachers, beholden to several institutions, find in them other categories of action besides those produced by and in the routine operation of the classroom" (2007, p. 37). This analysis thus reintegrates the "other" which we encountered earlier in our examination of the poles of activity proposed by Clot.

These perspectives, formulated on a scale as near to the subject and his situated action as possible, help pinpoint what is at stake in everyday interactions in the classroom and the school, in the complexity of registers of action. They better identify the specific character of teaching and the role of the subject. We cannot say they "psychologize" the study of teaching work, if by this we mean a centring on the interiority of action in a self-referential fashion. They remain fundamentally relational and cultural. In this sense, they remind us that the social aspect is comprised not only of institutionalized social rapports, but also of immediate rapports, the singular, the activity of the subject in his knowing, feeling and acting according to the situation. They also seek to reintroduce culture, its objects and tools into the study of cognition, of perception, of learning. And they show that there is no clear point of division between subjectivity and objectivity, but rather variable processes of subjectivation and objectivation, that the subject with the power to act can only be addressed as part of the situation which is already there and which he modifies by his own activity, which in turn is shaped by his subjectivity. This is an important contribution to the comprehension of the action which is a threat neither to sociology or psychology, but which on the contrary allows each to converge on the other in a mutually enriching dialogue. As Lahire (1998) notes, the objective conditions for a true interdisciplinarity are in place.

## CONCLUSIONS

The partial and selective overview I have presented in this text is an attempt to examine the place of the subject and his activity in an analysis of teaching work. It has shown us a subject acting in and on an uncertain situation fraught with contingencies, articulating his personal and professional preoccupations with those of his students and trying to evolve a milieu from which suffering is not absent but which facilitates the learning by his

students of legitimate skills, abilities and demeanours. This milieu, often that of the classroom, has a certain self-producing autonomy. The activity of the teacher, while partly contingent, indeterminate and unforeseeable, is structured according to poles of tension (skills, other, self) or organizing principles. The subject is at once knowing, feeling and acting.

The subject is acting (i.e. attributing meanings, having intentions, constructing learning activities or didactic games, articulating his preoccupations with those of others, developing a specific and normatively oriented activity, and fighting against what to him appear obstacles or impediments to action). A knowing, feeling subject acting in a situation which, even though it is structured and regulated by "organizers", remains largely open, contingent, indeterminate and unpredictable. The task of the teacher has a strong coefficient of discretion, and his activity is creative. There is something out of the ordinary even in his ordinary work. Teaching work is complex, and the role of the subject real and significant. Hence, in my view, the importance of in situ research on the teacher's professional judgement, for this would allow us to understand the teacher's action and the intentions behind it.

In so far as sociology does not view the analysis of the relational as anecdotal or reductive, the true reality therefore being that of institutionalized social rapports and objective structures of domination, and in so far as psychology and the perspectives closest to the subject do not perceive the latter as a thing in itself, an inside independent of outside, while they simultaneously address the subject and his situation, the latter being already there, socially and culturally constructed, then it is possible that as they each follow their own ways sociology and psychology will cross-fertilize each other.

Dialogue between disciplines is an obligation for the educational sciences if they are to be both interdisciplinary and "applied". Research into teaching work has enabled the educational sciences to break away from normative, prescriptive models. It has forced them to address real work by the flesh-and-bone people who perform it. In a field traditionally dominated by prescriptive educational theories, this work-centred approach may prove to be an important stage in the evolution of the educational sciences, on condition that they accentuate their ecumenical stance and promote dialogue, exchange and productive debate between the different approaches and disciplines.

Research into teaching work is also necessary for the initial and ongoing training of teachers. It is at the heart of any occupational professionalization project. Much more than macroscopic analysis, activity-based analysis is of great relevance to teacher training and the construction of a reflective teaching profession. In this regard, the conclusions drawn by Casalfiore, Bertone and Durand (2003) are heavy with consequence:

> This approach allows us to entertain a conviction as to the possibility of acting in the classroom despite serious and enduring determinants, notably of a sociological nature. In affirming the autonomy (limited but essential) of school situations, we implicitly acknowledge that it is possible to fight against differential school failure, and to train teachers on the basis of real practices. It also affirms that these teachers are privileged actors in the construction of these articulations in the classroom, and therefore are responsible for their progression and their efficacy (2003, p. 96).

It may be that the tools for the analysis of practice, in so far as they contribute to the cultivating among teachers of an improved grasp on classroom realities and an improvement of their own efficacy, will increase their ability to cope with the trials of their profession, to manage the tensions and dilemmas attendant upon their work in a creative manner. Thus equipped, teachers will feel themselves entitled to participate in a less defensive and more affirmative manner in the professional and social issues attendant upon teaching. Thus, in and through action, the profession will evolve.

But we have to be prudent about what we are promising: current educational policy, centred on the autonomy of the establishment and the professionalization of teaching, is designed to increase the efficiency of the school; it is imbued with the economic values of performance and efficiency. It tends to place the responsibility on the teachers, and to hold them to blame for the failure of educational systems. There is a political dimension to the analysis of work. It should not be concealed, and this requires that researchers exercise considerable rigour in their work.

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