Teaching, Research, *Poiesis*[1]

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Scholars make a distinction between teaching and research that comes, among other places, from the way these categories have been institutionalized in North American universities since the late nineteenth century, when German-style research universities began to proliferate in the United States (Bertrand, 1991; Cassuto, 2016). This distinction is even more pervasive in the twenty-first century as the political bodies governing universities demand an ever greater return on their investment in the form of students paying tuition and revenue generated by research grants. Paradoxically, this distinction becomes an obstacle that interferes with both tasks. It obscures important connections between teaching and research, in particular the degree to which effective teaching follows a logic underpinning the discovery of new knowledge, which is to say, the act of research.

Thus to address the theme of this special issue,[2] I begin with a detour: before talking about a different way to write research, we must identify the nature of the research to be written. I want to challenge this distinction in order to propose a way to overcome it. I begin by examining its philosophical underpinnings and proposing an alternative approach, that of reconceiving a course as a text. I then propose a definition of the term *research* derived from researchers' relationship to new knowledge and the tools they use to create it. This definition then allows me to

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[2] The original version of this essay appeared in a special issue devoted to the theme of "writing research differently."

describe how a course can become a text. After this explanation, I consider two examples: first, a doctoral seminar conducted entirely by email, and, second, two sections of the same master's seminar, one in French and the other in English, conducted in parallel over the course of a semester. What unites these examples and shows the value of my approach is the *poiesis* or creative act that occurs when a person, in a state of confusion or facing an irresolvable doubt, comes to a conclusion that goes beyond the limits of the framework imposed by the problem to be solved.

The false distinction between research and teaching

In the context of this essay, "writing research differently" comes to mean "encouraging discovery by transforming a course into a research text." To be sure, teaching and research shape each other, and good teachers constantly adapt their lessons to reflect the evolving knowledge in their field. But I am interested here in cases that go beyond this interdependent relationship (which still maintains the distinction I want to challenge). Specifically, I describe a mode of teaching that becomes a form of collective inquiry. I argue that one of the strengths of the humanities is that it helps students develop skills to respond nimbly to unpredictable circumstances. When students use the tools they have acquired in their studies to answer questions that have no clear answer – in short, to discover something otherwise hidden from view – they are doing research.

Learning is inextricably linked to discovery, and one of the main values of a course comes from its quality as an event. These two terms – *discovery* and *event* – call for explicit definitions. I understand *discovery* broadly: it is defined both by newness (people learn something they did not already know) and by the learner's active efforts (people are at least partially responsible for the act of knowledge acquisition). By this definition, discovery takes place at different scales, ranging from individual discovery (a person, through their own efforts, discovers something that is new to them, even if it is not new to others) to a disciplinary discovery (a person, through the work of a team to which they belong, discovers something of

which no one was previously aware). As for *event*, I borrow a concept from Paul Ricoeur (1981), according to whom a discursive event is defined by three qualities. First, it is realized "temporally and in the present." Second, it "refers back to its speaker by means of a complex set of indicators, such as personal pronouns." This quality is its ostensivity – the ability of speakers to refer to their shared environment. Finally, the discursive event is "always about something" (1981, p. 95).

The transformation of a course into a text is not without risks, which I list here in the form of three paradoxes. The first is related to the *event-like* nature of the course in contrast to the *fixity* of the text. The potential for discovery depends on the openness of the course's horizon: as long as it continues, participants can ask new questions. When a course ceases to be an event, it also ceases to be a *course*, having been transformed instead into a text whose content is fixed. The second paradox concerns the *inexhaustible* nature of the course in contrast to the *finitude* of the text. We can describe a course's content by describing the logic that shapes it, but the content as such, apart from a few moments that mark the route it takes, is not directly accessible. As a flow of signs characterized by a recursive interaction between environment and participants (Méchoulan and Vitali-Rosati, 2018), this content is too dynamic for our conventional analytical tools. The third paradox concerns the *finitude of the fixed text* in contrast to its *potential to become an event again*: despite everything, this fixity is not permanent. When a text is activated again, the potential of teaching-as-research is fully realized.

What is research?

So what does this research look like, and how is it written? These questions imply two others: how does teaching become research and how does teaching-as-research become a text?

We do research when we ask a question that satisfies two criteria corresponding to the two parts of the definition of *discovery* I proposed above: the answer is not yet known, and we can find an answer by adopting systematic tools that constitute

our method. Research, like discovery, can also be done at different scales. Students do research, for example, when they write a literature review, even if what they discover is not new within the discipline itself. At the other end of the spectrum, academics do research when they identify and describe a previously unknown phenomenon. What matters is that the researcher comes to know things they did not know before.

With respect to the first criterion, in the courses I examine here, teaching becomes an exercise in collective inquiry when I organize the syllabus: I choose topics and readings that are likely to raise questions I cannot answer, a fact that forces my students and me to develop answers together (see, for example, Conway, 2020b). These questions share a common characteristic, namely, their openness: what happens, for example, if we question taken-for-granted presuppositions in communication studies? I have answers in mind, of course, but they do not prevent others from finding their own.

The second criterion is more complex. To have confidence in our answer, we must identify and explain where it comes from and on what it is based. Hence the question of method. In this regard, I adapt a three-part model proposed by Stephen Toulmin, according to whom an argument consists of *claims* and *evidence*, which are linked by a philosophical *warrant* (see Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik, 1979). A claim is the central assertion on which an argument is built; evidence is the data collected by the researcher in support of the claim; and the warrant, which takes the form of an evaluative standard, is the logical principle that grounds the claim in the evidence.

This model applies as much to interpretive as to quantitative and qualitative research. To identify a method, we must identify these three components. At the risk of oversimplification, in the case of quantitative research, for example, evidence tends to take the form of measurements and descriptive statistics. The warrant tends to be based on an empiricist epistemology, and claims are made about the models that the data make possible. An argument is persuasive if it is probable: if

the *p*-value is less than 0.05 (depending on the statistical test and the circumstances of observation), the passage from evidence to claim is justified.

The warrant for an interpretive argument is also probability – "An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than others" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 175) – but it belongs to another epistemological paradigm. How to demonstrate this probability? It is difficult, if not impossible, to measure an interpretation in the same way as we might measure the variables of an experiment comparing a control group and an experimental group. Instead, we must turn to other principles. Ricoeur (1981) gives us two, congruence and plenitude. By *congruence*, he means accuracy and precision: does an interpretation of a text reflect its content? As for *plenitude*, he quotes Monroe Beardsley, who says, "All of the connotations which are suitable must be attributed; the poem means all that it can mean" (1981, pp. 137–138).

Claims, evidence, and warrant in interpretive research

This principle applies to other texts, too. With respect to evidence, congruence relates to the content of a text – the signs that constitute it and the relationships between them – while plenitude relates to the connections that link it to other texts. Claims thus relate to the tension between a text's internal properties and its links to texts outside itself. They consist of assertions, for example, that interpretation *A* reflects the content of a text better than interpretation *B* (congruence) and that it provides a more comprehensive account of the connotations of the text in relation to its context of interpretation (plenitude).

Where signs are concerned, Ricoeur borrows from Charles Sanders Peirce, who maintains that anything that evokes something for someone is a sign. Peirce calls that which *evokes* (regardless of its form, whether a word, an image, a physical object, or even an idea) a "representamen," and he calls that which is *evoked* an "interpretant" (1940, p. 99). He contends that signs are integrated into a network of references because of the double role played by the interpretant, which becomes a sign – a new representamen – by referring to yet another interpretant, which

refers to yet another, and so on. Signs linked in this way become increasingly complex, so much so that a representamen evokes a whole series of interpretants (or connotations) which, in turn, evoke others in an endless series.

For this reason, arguments about the interpretation of a text cannot be exhaustive. Let us consider the principle of congruence. To describe the content of a text is to describe the representamens that combine to form it. To describe their meaning is to describe what they refer to, that is, their interpretants. But as texts grow in complexity, so does their meaning; anyone who stops at the first level of interpretants has only scratched the surface.[3] These interpretants become second-order representamens, and the interpretants they evoke third-order representamens. At this point, two problems arise. The first is that sooner or later, the interpretation of a text must end, even if the chain of interpretants does not. The second is that the further we explore these chains, the more obscure and idiosyncratic the links between representamens and interpretants become. First-order interpretants are likely to be shared by readers who belong to the same culture, but those of the third or fourth (or nth) order are not. The relationship between signs within a text is inexhaustible.

The relationship between text and context (or other texts) is also inexhaustible. Here we are dealing with the principle of plenitude. The same logic of sign chains applies: the representamens also refer to interpretants outside the text (for example, to other texts) and thus generate new representamens.[4] The same problems also arise, including the finite nature of any interpretation compared to this potentially infinite chain of interpretants, as well as the fact that the further one gets from the original text, the more idiosyncratic the connotations are likely to become.

Thus for interpretive research, the claim is the interpretation as such – the assertion that a text conveys this meaning or that. The evidence consists in the signs, which can be broken down into representamens and interpretants, linked in

[3] Who would say that *Hamlet* is nothing but the story of a prince who takes revenge on his uncle for the death of his father?

[4] I cannot read *Hamlet* without thinking of Heinrich von Kleist's *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, which shares some of the same themes.

a relationship of interdependence where one leads to the next. The warrant is based on probability, observed by comparing the point at which two competing interpretations meet the criteria of congruence and plenitude.

So what does a text look like, especially a course treated as a text?

The course-as-text

Here we need to define the word *text*. A text is a category that includes "all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 159). More precisely, a text is characterized by at least five features:

1. A text consists of a "finite and closed totality" which can "range from a paragraph to a chapter, to a book, to a set of 'selected works', to the corpus of the 'complete works' of an author" (Ricoeur, 1981, pp. 98 and 128);
2. A text has a "propositional content" (1981, p. 167), which is to say, it asserts, with various degrees of complexity, that *A is B* or that *Y does Z*;
3. A text, as a closed totality, can only make non-ostensive references. In contrast to two speakers who can indicate a common world where they are situated at the moment of speaking, the author of a text and their reader no longer share an environment, and the "concrete conditions of the act of pointing no longer exist" (1981, p. 103);
4. The intention of the author of a text thus loses its primacy: "What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies" (1981, p. 101);
5. Finally, text is addressed to any potential reader: "written discourse creates an audience which extends in principle to anyone who can read" (1981, p. 101).

A course, beginning as a discursive event, undergoes a qualitative change when it becomes a text. Consider a fundamental characteristic of a course, at least the

ones I teach on communication method or theory. There is a tension at every stage between the content (readings and lectures organized in a specific order) and the conversation I have with my students. No matter how well I organize the readings, I have limited control over the conversation that develops when I am with my students in a classroom. When students are driven by curiosity – curiosity being an essential ingredient in learning if our goal is to move beyond the work of memorization – the conversation can take an unexpected turn at any time.

The course loses this event-like aspect at the end of the semester when my students and I can no longer ask each other questions. It becomes a text insofar as it becomes a "meaningful action" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 159), accessible to readers who interpret it in different contexts. It is the interpretation that makes the flow of signs a text, and for this reason, this course-as-text is *inscribed* without necessarily being *written*.

How does this transformation take place?

There are many ways to turn a course into a *text*, but not all turn it into *research*, at least in the sense I mean here. For example, the scholarship of teaching and learning, which developed in the United States in the 1990s, takes teaching practices as its object of study (Rege Colet, McAlpine, Fanghanel, and Weston, 2011). Researchers ask a professional question by focusing on effective teaching methods, but the content of a course itself is of little importance. The methods studied, such as strategies for conducting a "flipped classroom" (Bissonnette and Gauthier, 2012), can be applied equally well to a communication course and to a chemistry course.

Another approach would be to turn lectures into a textbook. I have adopted this strategy by turning my PowerPoint slides into chapters in a book that I give to students in my undergraduate theory course (Conway, 2020a). Students, too, can adapt a course in this way, as those of Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist who died in 1913, did in 1916 when they published the *Cours de linguistique générale*, based on their seminar notes (Saussure, 1995/1916). But this approach is hardly more satisfying than the scholarship of teaching and learning. The book by

Saussure's students, for example, is merely an echo of the seminars – characterized by the conversation and questioning that surely took place when Saussure was in the same room as his students – that it is meant to represent (see Godel, 1969).

Indeed, the traces left by such a conversation, those that constitute the flow I am trying to describe, are ephemeral. Hence the first paradox I identify in the introduction: the moment a course becomes a text, it ceases to be a course, having lost its event-like quality.

Example 1: A seminar conducted by email

To understand this loss, let us consider what would happen if we tried to capture a course as it was happening. In the fall of 2020, I conducted a doctoral seminar entirely by email, an option that would have seemed odd before the Covid-19 pandemic forced professors to rethink their approach to teaching. We compiled most of our messages into an electronic book (Conway, Ichiba, and Zhao, 2021). This book reflects the evolution of our conversation better than my PowerPoint-based textbook, for instance, and hints at the dynamics of our exchange, in the process providing heuristic clues that allow us to observe how a course becomes a research text.

The seminar focused on method in communication studies and was spread over twelve weeks. Each week we read a book (or a few selected chapters) designed both to explore a methodological approach and to show its flaws. To encourage discussion, we each wrote a 1,000-word response to the reading and then responses of about 150 words to each other. I can say that when I read in conversation with my students, their interpretations influenced mine, and mine seemed to influence theirs, so that each of us came to a different understanding of the texts than if we had read them alone. This is an example of stigmergy, or the principle that "a trace left by an action in a given environment stimulates the completion of a subsequent action in the same environment" (Larrue and Vitali-Rosati, 2019, p. 53).

What are the components of the text we created from this course? On its own, the ebook does not exhaust the material. There is also the syllabus, the books

themselves, the private notes we took as we read, and so on. But this stigmergy shows how much the course as such is denatured when we transform it. Despite the creative dynamism when we were engaged in reading together, the content of the seminar was fixed once the course was over (trait 1 of the definition of *text* developed above).

As for the "propositional content" (trait 2), it was largely related to method, as might be expected. I called the course "Method and Its Undoing," to replace the institutional title "Research Methods 1." If I had taught the course in French, I would have put the title in the imperative – "Défaisons la méthodologie" – to better reflect the task I was assigning students. The first task was to undo the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods, which hides as much as it reveals. Other modes of inquiry, I said in the syllabus (Conway, Ichiba, and Zhao, 2021, pp. 159–160), addressing other concerns, were not only possible but also desirable.

To this end, we turned to questions of language and persuasion, which are not neutral tools: they actively shape our encounter with the world we claim to be studying, and their methodological implications demand sustained reflection.[5] But these approaches, too, hide as much as they reveal: the philosophy that grounds them is subject to politics and, in some cases, the bald assertion of power. Thus we also engaged with challenges to "Western" methodological hegemony, in particular from Indigenous perspectives, to see what questions they raised about the implicit assumptions of methodology as it is taught in most North American communication departments.

At the time of its creation, this content was characterized by both ostensive references (i.e., to what was happening in Ottawa, Ontario, during the Fall 2020 semester) and non-ostensive references (i.e., to the world of books we were reading, but which we did not physically occupy). But once the course was over and its form

[5] This paragraph and the two that follow are adapted from the preface of our ebook (Conway, Ichiba, and Zhao, 2021, pp. 1–6).

fixed, all references lost their ostensive quality. All our references are now to a world we do not share because the moment we shared it has passed (trait 3).

A number of consequences follow from this fixity. For one thing, although we wrote with a sense of intentionality – we were responding to each other, asking each other questions, trying to persuade each other about the soundness of our interpretations – our intentions ceased to be directly knowable at the point where they were no longer grounded in that exchange (trait 4). In other words, when the class ended, the seminar-as-text took its fixed form, foreclosing the possibility we enjoyed during the seminar to ask, "What do you mean?" In a practical sense, this means that as I reread our exchanges now, I'm sometimes lost, as the context within which our messages to each other were meaningful is no longer accessible. And now that we're making our ebook widely available, I wonder how our potential readers might react to the turns in our conversation – the points where we tried an argument on for size and then changed our minds, or where we misspoke and then corrected ourselves and each other (trait 5). To be honest, I can imagine some of our potential readers, but not all. Who will they be? Perhaps they will be my departmental colleagues. Perhaps they will be Internet users who stumble upon our ebook while doing a Google search. What will they think of us? Maybe they'll be curious about what we talked about. Maybe they will be predisposed to believe that we are irredeemable ideologues. Whoever they are, since we won't be there, they won't be able to ask us about our intention. They will only have our book – a complex but finite combination of signs – to interpret.

Our book provides clues of our peregrinations, but it cannot capture the movement of our conversation – between readers and books, between participants in our messages to each other – in any exhaustive way. To borrow and image from Henri Bergson, this book, by its very nature, can no more capture the original flow of the course "so far as [it] is moving, than the bridges thrown here and there across the stream follow the water that flows under their arches" (Bergson, 2008/1911, p. 338). In other words, the book fixes certain moments of our exchange, but only suggests the movement that produced them.

The creative dimension of confusion

However, there was more to the course than what was lost. We gained things, too, and the creative value of this approach was clear in the evolution of the students' responses from the beginning of the course to the end. Our first reading was Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which at first glance had no clear relation to the methods students had encountered before. At the end of the course, one of the students explained how confusing he found the text, which I obviously valued highly. "Am I enrolled in a linguistics class? Why do I have to read Aristotle's classics?" he wrote in one of his comments (Conway, Ichiba, and Zhao, 2021, p. 150). But over the course of the semester, the other readings, especially Ricoeur's *Rule of Metaphor* (2003), served to fill in the gaps opened by Aristotle. To recover from their confusion, students had to engage in the conversation created when Ricoeur, for example, reworked ideas developed by Aristotle by reworking the same ideas themselves. The other student, who had also expressed confusion at the beginning of the semester, explained that this struggle forced her to formulate her own perspective on methodology that went beyond what the authors were saying (Conway, Ichiba, and Zhao, 2021, pp. 152–154). Indeed, their comments revealed new dimensions of the texts. The students were doing research, as I defined it in the introduction.

Hence the third paradox: despite its fixed form, our course-as-text retains the potential to become an event again. I can only speculate on the effect this course will have on the students (whose privacy I want to protect, other than what I have quoted here), but I hope that the creative skills and habits they have acquired to overcome their confusion will continue to help them elaborate new dimensions of their research objects.

Example 2: Parallel seminars in two languages

Let us now consider another course I teach regularly, in this case a master's seminar focused on media theory. This course is more conventional. Unlike my methods seminar, we meet weekly (either in person or by video conference) and we do not

produce a book. As for the text into which we can transform it, however, the difference is one of degree, not substance. "To what extent may we say that what is *done* is inscribed?" asks Ricoeur (1981, p. 167). "Certain metaphors can help us in this respect. We say that such and such an event has *left its mark* on its time." Inscription occurs to the degree that we can identify the components of the course-as-text (the syllabus, the readings, the discussions, the notes I took after each session that I have consulted to write this section of this essay, and so on) and that the course "leaves its mark" on the participants, who, I hope, see the world differently after it ends. We are still dealing with a finite text that does not reflect the inexhaustible nature of the course, the second paradox listed above, so long as this list of components remains incomplete. The main difference between my method and theory seminars is that the one on method was inscribed in a much more literal way (even if our ebook does not reflect the entirety of what constitutes the text).

I want to highlight three aspects of my theory seminar here. First, to account for the relevance of congruence and plenitude as warrants for an interpretive argument, I consider the dialogical organization of the seminar. Second, I examine what happens when the connections between representamens and their interpretants are obscure. Finally, I consider the creative role of doubt in interpretation.

One unusual aspect of my theory seminar is that I usually teach two sections at once, one in French and one in English. Since the university where I work is bilingual and my department is divided between French and English theoretical traditions, I organize the readings in such a way as to show the historical dialogue that has occurred between theorists in the two languages. For example, we begin by reading the sections of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1995/1916) that deal with the sign. These sections provide the key concepts for understanding Roland Barthes's (1972) arguments about ideology, arguments that are taken up by Stuart Hall (1980), among others, in his influential essay on encoding and decoding.

The task facing students is twofold. They must decipher the arguments made by each of the authors and put those arguments into the context of the dialogue in which they occurred. The task of deciphering relates to congruence and that of contextualization to plenitude, but the two parts are inextricably linked. Consider one example, Barthes's reinterpretation of the sign, which takes the well-known structure of the sign as proposed by Saussure and extends it to include another dimension of meaning. While Saussure (1995/1916, pp. 97–100) sees the sign as a unit made up of a signifier and a signified, Barthes argues that every Saussurean sign (linguistic or otherwise) is itself capable of becoming a new signifier, which he calls "myth." His best-known example is the cover of a 1950s issue of *Paris Match,* which shows a young African boy saluting a French flag outside the frame. The meaning of the image, according to Barthes, is the boy himself, but the signification (or *mythic* meaning) is quite different. It is the idea that "France is a great Empire" and "that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal" of this young boy (Barthes, 1972, p. 116).

In order to understand and explain the system Barthes establishes, that is, to properly meet the criterion of congruence, students must recognize the distinction Barthes makes between his system and Saussure's. They must also understand the reason behind this distinction and what new dimension of communication it reveals, related to the influence of ideology. It is also useful to know who in turn uses Barthes's ideas and how. Hall (1980), for example, uses the more developed model of the sign to demonstrate that the distinction between denotative and connotative levels of meaning is artificial. Students cannot, therefore, decipher Barthes without at the same time considering the other texts to which he refers. Congruence implies plenitude.

However, this approach does not fully reflect the research dimension of a course-as-text because it does not cover the aspect of discovery. Consider, then, a moment when the link between representamens and interpretants is not clear and, as a result, the obscure meaning of a text must still be worked out. In both sections of my seminar, we read the same texts, in translation when necessary. It often

happens that, for linguistic reasons, some students understand a reading better than others. For example, Saussure uses three terms in French that do not have tidy equivalents in English, namely *langage*, *langue*, and *parole* (see Saussure, 1995/1916, p. 31). *Langage* is everything that relates to the human capacity to use linguistic and other signs to communicate. As for *langue*,

> Pour nous elle ne se confond pas avec le langage; elle n'en est qu'une partie déterminée, essentielle, il est vrai. C'est à la fois un produit social de la faculté du langage et un ensemble de conventions nécessaires, adoptées par le corps social pour permettre l'exercice de cette faculté chez les individus. (1995/1916, p. 25)[6]

If *langue* is the social dimension of *langage*, *parole* is the individual dimension. As Saussure explains, it constitutes the "côté exécutif [qui] reste hors de cause, car l'exécution n'est jamais faite pas la masse; elle est toujours individuelle et l'individu en est toujours le maître; nous l'appellerons la *parole*" (1995/1916, p. 30).[7] In other words, *langue* is the set of signs and rules for combining them, and *parole* is any act of formulating a message by means of these signs.

Since English has no clear translation of these three terms, translators have been forced either to give the original in parentheses or resort to explanatory circumlocutions. Wade Baskin, author of the first translation in 1959, opts for the first choice: "But what is language [*langue*]? It is not to be confused with human speech [*langage*], of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one" (Saussure, 1959/1916, p. 9). Roy Harris, author of the second translation in 1983, opts for circumlocutions: "What, then, is linguistic structure? It is not, in

[6] "For us, *langue* should not be confused with *langage*, of which it is an essential, determined part, it is true. It is simultaneously a social product of the faculty of language and a set of necessary conventions, adopted by the social body to allow the exercise of this faculty among individuals." Author's translation.

[7] "The executive side [that] plays no part, for action is never performed by the mass; it is always individual and the individual is always its master; we will call it *parole*." Author's translation.

our opinion, simply the same thing as language. Linguistic structure is only one part of language, even though it is an essential part" (Saussure, 1983/1916, p. 9). Or, with regard to the term *parole*, here is Baskins' translation: "Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side *speaking* [*parole*]" (Saussure, 1959/1916, p. 13). And that of Harris: "The executive side of it plays no part, for execution is never carried out by the collectivity: it is always individual, and the individual is always master of it. This is what we shall designate by the term *speech*" (Saussure, 1983/1916, p. 13).

These differences do not worry Saussure, who argues that "nous avons défini les choses et non des mots [... Toute] définition faite à propos d'un mot est vaine; c'est une mauvaise méthode que de partir des mots pour définir les choses" (1995/1916, p. 31).[8] But in order to meet the criteria of congruence and plenitude, my English-speaking and French-speaking students follow different paths. Those who read in English, most of whom do not speak French, must reflect on ideas that seem to run counter to the meanings they usually attribute to these words and ultimately rely on the explanation that follows the definitions proposed by Saussure and his translators. On the other hand, those who read in French arrive more directly at the meaning that Saussure gives to these words; for them, his explanation is only a clarification of the meanings already present in their pre-existing polysemy.[9]

The creative dimension of doubt

Even if students have to follow different trajectories to arrive at the interpretation of these texts, the texts generally provide what they need to understand them. Consider, then, a final situation where this is not the case, where students – or even

[8] "We have defined things and not words [... Every] definition of a word is vain; it's a bad method to start from words to define things." Author's translation.

[9] It should be noted that both groups, regardless of how they arrive at an interpretation of Saussure, must subsequently situate his ideas in relation to the authors who respond to them, as I indicate above.

their professor! – must, despite a profound doubt, stake out a position on the meaning conveyed by a text.

Here I am thinking of a paradox that I will call the paradox of the neologism and the calque. One fundamental difference between a native speaker and a non-native speaker, irrespective of language, is related to these two categories. If someone says an unfamiliar word, the native speaker is likely to know whether it is a neologism, a calque, or a word that they simply do not recognize. It is a simple doubt, in response to which a native speaker need only ask, "What does this word mean?" The non-native speaker, on the other hand, is faced with several possibilities between which they cannot choose because they lack the necessary tools. In this case, it is a double – and therefore more radical – doubt because the speaker has to ask two questions at once: "What does this word mean?" and "Does this word exist?" So long as the non-native speaker cannot answer the second question, they will struggle to know whether the first is even appropriate.

For example, sometimes I explain a concept and see from my students' reactions that they are confused. When I teach in English, my first language, I am faced with two possibilities: either my students do not know the term or my explanation is not clear. I can be sure, however, that the term does in fact belong to the English language. When I teach in French, another possibility arises, and I have to ask myself if I have misspoken because my English is interfering with my French without my even realizing it. This doubt comes from the possibility of not even being aware of what I don't know. I face (at the risk of quoting former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld) an unknown unknown.

This structure is echoed in teaching. Sometimes a student asks me a question to which I don't know the answer. In some cases, the answer is easily found. This is a simple doubt. But in other cases, it is not of a nature to be verified, such as questions of interpretation that force us to reconcile irreconcilable positions. This is a double doubt. In this second case I cannot promise to come back next week with the answer, as I would in the case of a simple doubt. On the contrary, I must

recognize that we are collectively confronted with a problem whose solution, if it has one, remains to be found. We are therefore called upon to do research.

Conclusion: appropriation and *poiesis*

It is at this point that a course is fully realized as research and that a method that is both interpretive and collective proves its value. The act of *living* this research at the time of its inscription, as the course takes place, and of *reliving* it once it is inscribed, after the course has ended, forces the participants to give up the certainty they might have had with regard to their interpretation of the world around them. This double doubt thus creates a void that they try to fill.

To be clear, "fill" does not mean "reach a definitive interpretation." For irreconcilable positions, in any case, this would be an impossibility. Rather, the goal is to challenge any supposedly settled truth. It is a lesson that dates from the era of Socrates for whom, according to Julia Kristeva, "truth ('meaning') is the product of a dialogical relationship among speakers; it is correlational and its relativism appears by virtue of the observers' autonomous points of view" (1986, p. 51).

It is also at this point that the course-as-text recovers its event-like aspect. The act of filling this void has a paradoxical quality: it is an essential step for the participants in the course-as-text as they appropriate it, to borrow one last time from Ricoeur, according to whom "the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (1981, p. 120). This self-interpretation is what Ricoeur calls appropriation. It is the dialectical counterpart of distancing, involving "a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic *ego*" (1981, p. 155). The course becomes an event again because the person in front of the text responds as if the text were their partner in conversation. Their response requires an active "letting-go" through which the act of reading becomes an "appropriation-divestiture" (1981, p. 153):

> [W]hat is "made our own" is not something mental, not the intention of another subject, nor some design supposedly hidden behind the text;

> rather, it is the projection of a world, the proposal of a mode of being-in-the-world, which the text discloses in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references. (1981, p. 154)

In the context of a course-as-text, the opening of this world is a form of *poiesis*, the term used by the ancient Greeks to designate the creative force allowing the "passage of non-being into being" (Plato, *Symposium*, 205b). From the void springs a world. Or, in more practical terms, the value of a communication course is measured by how well the tools students acquire allow them to improvise when faced with problems that have no clear solution. As they encounter such problems, they revisit the course to examine these tools from new angles. The changing circumstances in which they find themselves bring out new dimensions of the components of the course-as-text, and so they must find new answers. Although its form is fixed, the course-as-text thus continues to serve as a conversation partner, and references to these changing circumstances regain an ostensive quality. The research that students do in formulating their new answers leaves its mark in a way similar to the research they did while the course was in progress.

It is to this *poiesis* that I aspire as a professor who rejects the old distinction between research and teaching.

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