Teaching Philosophy in an Italian School Abroad: Brief Comparative Notes

by *Davide Dodesini**

Abstract

What is there to learn about teaching philosophy by working at the Italian School in Istanbul? The different cultural frames of students and teachers, and their different levels in mastering Italian can become both an obstacle and a resource for the educational process. The fresh experience of being sent to teach abroad in a lockdown situation, due to the Covid19 pandemic, and of having to teach students I had never met in person, was a big challenge that forced me to question and change my teaching methods. This challenging historical moment can become an opportunity to reflect on effective ways of teaching philosophy online, and to ask ourselves: what is there to gain or lose? The ongoing experience of social distancing is tiring and very stressful, but if philosophy also has the aim of developing thoughts in order to better cope with different moments in life, then it should be taught in a way that allows students to approach the subject as a tool for the acquisition of understanding and meaning, and not merely as a sequence of ideas throughout history.

Keywords: Lockdown Teaching, Online Philosophy Lessons, Teaching in an Italian School Abroad, Cultural and Language Barriers.

1. Italian Schools Abroad

Cultural diplomacy is one of the tools through which the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation promotes the country abroad; alongside the system of Italian Cultural Institutes, which have the purpose of promoting Italy's cultural production, the Ministry directly manages, or finances, a wide range of educational institutions, which aim

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to «promote the Italian language and culture», as well as to maintain «the cultural identity of compatriot's children, and citizens of Italian origin»[1].

Among these institutions, there are seven Italian State run schools, which, as a matter of fact, follow an Italian curriculum, that is integrated to the one of the country where the school is located. This means that, within these schools, the same subjects of Italian schools are offered, but reformulated in terms of time scheduling, to make room for the subjects of the local curriculum. The teaching staff, that works for these institutions is, in part, sent from Italy and, in part, recruited locally.

2. My First Teaching Experience Abroad

It was the year 2000/2001 when I received my first post as a substitute teacher of History and Philosophy at the Italian School in Athens, a Public Scientific Lyceum.

Teaching in an Italian school abroad means, first of all, dealing with a high school structure over four years, instead of five, but above all it means dealing with a situation where students have a very differentiated knowledge of Italian that, although it is the language used for almost all the taught subjects, is not the mother tongue of most of them. And this fact must necessarily be taken into account while teaching.

I spent those first days studying and preparing lessons that aimed to be as stimulating as possible, while respecting the main topics to be covered, and considered the different levels of understanding of the language. Those were years in which the principles of school autonomy[2] had just entered the Italian school system, with an almost absent yearly activity planification, and a pedagogical approach still strongly linked to the historicist model of teaching philosophy. Yet a certain unawareness, and the lack of bureaucracy surrounding the teacher's choices, left great room for pedagogical creativity, sometimes impromptu, but lively and stimulating. During those four months, I clearly understood that I liked teaching and that the exchange with the students was the part of the game, which repaid – and still repays today – the many difficulties and frustrations that this job can reserve. And I also promised myself to try again with teaching abroad.

3. Twenty years later: Italian school in Istanbul

During the month of December 2019, I received the assignment to teach at

[1] See https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/cultura/scuoleitalianeallestero.

[2] In 1998, the so-called "Law on School Autonomy" was passed. This law implied more room for the schools to organize their own curriculum and projects.

the Italian Lyceum in Istanbul. I was supposed to move to my new school in March 2020, but the closed borders, following the spread of Covid, and the lockdown forced me to stay in Italy.

At the beginning of September 2020, I started working in my new Italo-Turkish school environment.

The Turkish school system, since 2012, is divided into three levels: primary school (4 years), middle school (4 years), high school (4 years). The access to the upper level from the middle one is determined by the evaluations obtained in the lower one.

Teaching philosophy is part of the Turkish Lyceum curricula, but it is not necessarily among the compulsory subjects and, therefore, it depends on the educational offer of the single schools[3].

Reading through some documents on teaching philosophy in Turkey, I could find common elements with the general framework of European skills[4], but also differences regarding the "moral value table", which are supposed to be promoted through teaching philosophy. If, on the one hand, philosophy ranks among the subjects that develop critical thinking, problem solving, promoting metacognitive reflection and acquiring a «culture of debate, and original, independent, critical and logical thought», as well as «the awareness about the changes and developments of human thought», on the other hand we can notice a certain stress on national, spiritual and patriotic values of the Turkish Nation; philosophy is, therefore, meant to contribute to «the fulfilment of [students'] duties and responsibilities towards the State, the Republic and the national society», and must guide them to «acquire universal and spiritual values»[5].

It is within this institutional and regulatory context that the "Liceo Italiano IMI" in Istanbul operates; founded in 1888, for the Italian educational system it is considered a Public State run School, while for the Turkish one it is a Private school, and must therefore follow the rules of Turkish private high schools. In fact, students who graduate from this Institute acquire a Turkish diploma and, if they choose to undertake the Italian State Exam, they obtain an Italian Diploma too. Students of Turkish nationality, who attend the Italian high school, pay a fee, while for the ones that have Italian citizenship the school is free of charges. The institutional framework of the school determines the composition of the school population, and sets, as well, the expectations of families, whom invest financial resources to ensure an internationally oriented education.

[3] For more information: https://wenr.wes.org/2017/04/education-in-turkey.

[4] See https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&-from=EN.

[5] For more information see: http://www.soeagra.com/ijert/ijertdec2015/3.pdf.

During the first weeks of teaching, when I got to know better my students, I understood that their choice of attending the Italian school has different reasons ranging from family traditions, to the possibility of being confronted with another culture and school system, to the opportunity, thanks to the Italian diploma, to access European Union Universities.

4. Teaching philosophy in an "other" context

4.1. E-Learning and e-Teaching

2020 has been a problematic year for everyone: society in general, teachers and students. While waiting to leave to Istanbul, I shared the difficulties of distance learning with my Italian colleagues. I spent the first months trying to understand how to best perform my functions, within the new and unexpected dimension of this way of teaching. I felt unprepared and looked at it with a certain mistrust, but the ongoing emergency has imposed, and continues to impose, the necessity to rethink my role as a teacher.

Like most of the people that work in education, I was caught up in a debate – mostly uninteresting and scarcely eye opening – which developed around the theme of what, in Italy, has recently been renamed Integrated Digital Education (DDI). I know that it is necessary to use all the potential of DDI, in order to unfold the pedagogical relationship at best, given the circumstances, but I still cannot fully measure its effectiveness. I am sure that this experience will leave its marks over time, and that some e-learning practices will be integrated into the face-to-face education, and this will be a good result, that will enrich the different ways of teaching.

Nevertheless, I cannot hide to my self what I consider the most striking alienating effect of e-teaching, which still makes me skeptical about it; it is not so much the lack of contact – because in fact that exists in a virtual way – but the absence of the physical bodies, of the non-verbal language that allows me, as a teacher, to catch a smile of awareness and comprehension, or a grimace of boredom and a lost look, which force me to correct the target and re-explain the matter.

I feel that the sense of bewilderment, which I felt during last year's e-learning process, is even more pronounced since my arrival at the Istanbul Lyceum. Obviously, it is already quite alienating to be in a school context where there are two pedagogical models (Turkish and Italian), and in which most of the students aren't Italian native speakers but, in the very specific circumstance of this school year, I also found myself e-teaching and dealing with students, that I've never met in person, and whom I can't see, because if everyone keeps his/her camera on, the system crashes.

If during face-to-face classes, students are solicited to interact with teachers also through an encouraging look, a smile, a joke, during distance learning, this cannot happen and, often, students hide behind their screens, and probably disappear in their own world. As a teacher I'm not sure whether to insist on their active participation, forcing them through my questions, or whether to wait until they feel safe and let them participate spontaneously. Teaching to many icons has, as a matter of fact, a bitter aftertaste, because you cannot assess whether the matter that is discussed passes the screen, and involves or touches someone in depth.

I am convinced that teaching philosophy is based on such "special understandings" but, distance learning, doesn't allow me to be sure that there is some sort of acknowledgement. The only moment when I discover that something is actually going on, is when some students interact with me, through their questions. But what happens to shy pupils? And what goes on with the ones with some frailty? Or those who need to be escorted, hand in hand, to get through their rejection of philosophy, which they prejudicially consider useless, cumbersome, boring? I have the feeling that an entirely remote teaching, affects the less passionate students the most; they disappear from the horizon, and one notices this loss only when they are tested, or when they deliver the assigned homework. And how can we fix this loss, once you realize that some pupils have been lost along the way? In a face-to-face situation, usually, you can stop them for a moment after the class, ask them how it's going, investigate if there is any difficulty and, thus, approach the boy or girl, in order to establish a dialogue, and maybe lead them back on track. Distance learning doesn't allow such informal education moments, because students and teachers have to rush to the next hour's call, or because, as soon as you greet goodbye to the group, they click the button and disappear; and the fear of having lost them forever increases.

4.2. Belonging and sharing

Distance learning, in general, creates difficulties in the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students; nevertheless, being in a different context than the known one – I mean the culture and habits each person belongs to – can become a resource and allows to make useful comparisons between the students' cultures and the teacher's one. The easy access to information, made possible by technology, allows, in fact, to build rapid and effective connections, as well as to solve conceptual and linguistic problems, a fact that twenty years ago wasn't even conceivable.

Teaching philosophy in a different context, and outside the framework of an "in presence school routine", can also be seen as a great opportunity

to escape the restrictions of a ritualized school made of lessons-exercises-assessment. I am not stating that it is an easy task to transform the difficulties of distance learning into an opportunity, and I am aware of the fact that the school system, even in our given circumstances, remains rigid with its division in hours and subjects, and its obligation to comply with the set goals of learning plans, and the necessity to assess the students with grades, but maybe we can see this odd situation as a moment to think anew what schooling should be.

Moreover, being in a different context and e-teaching impose the urge to set new goals, and to overcome the obstacles. For example, the fact that Italian is the language of philosophy teaching, but it isn't the students' mother tongue, is an obstacle, but it is also, to a certain extent, a "useful limit", because it forces the teacher to find forms of clear expression, in order to allow students to access to philosophical concepts.

Making these concepts understandable is a real challenge for both thinking and teaching. In an Italian cultural context, it is possible to refer to examples taken from the general cultural context, to explain them through similar ideas, and therefore translate the specific language of philosophy, and let it become part of the students' vocabulary. In an "other" context, this is not always possible, because, at times, the meaning of the references isn't available; sometime the simplified synonym is equally unknown, and mentioning to the constellation of significant of one's own cultural belonging often isn't very fruitful, or can raise misunderstandings.

This means that, while preparing the lessons and during the explanations, it is necessary to unfold the philosophical concepts one by one, trying, not without difficulties, not to lose their specific meaning. The effort is to make concepts such as "being", "becoming", "cogito", "spirit" accessible, and this is already very complex even for Italian students, but it becomes even more so when facing students who live another horizon of thought, determined by their mother tongue, that is, as Laura Boella puts it, «the language of idiomatic expressions, poems learned by heart and the most intimate feelings, [...] the language of recognition, which occurs when one instinctively understands the spoken language in the streets or you meet childhood friends and you feel you have a story that unites and does not separate» (Boella, 2020, p. 27)[6]; language is, indeed, something that determines the framework of one's way of thinking and reasoning.

[6] This statement is referred to Hannah Arendt's philosophical bilingualism, and how this bilingualism has influenced her reflections. When I came across this quote, I had to reflect on how language affects teaching too, and on the strong link between language and thought. Now that I have to teach philosophy to non-native speakers, this fact has become even more evident. For more references see Arendt (2019).

Another problem, during philosophy and history lessons, which is related to the influence of students' cultural heritage belonging, is the link that European philosophy and history have with the Christian religion. As long as the subjects remain within the sphere of Greek philosophy, the references to polytheism, to the divine, in its broadest sense, do not create problems, because they are perceived as extraneous "cultural data", but once we move on to the developments of subsequent philosophies, the comparison with Christianity becomes tighter. While some references to Christianity can be taken for granted in an Italian class – less and less in my experience – this is not possible in a multi-religious context such as the one where I currently teach. This type of "misplacement" is, at the same time, a problem and a stimulus for me as a teacher.

Turkish society, like any other society, is by no means monolithic and presents very different cultural and religious traditions. Moreover, Istanbul is a sort of state in itself within the Turkish nation, and it shows an evident socio-cultural-religious differentiation, which implies that among my students many are of Islamic religion, but many other aren't, or they don't practice their belief; however, in Turkey, as in Italy, there is a prevalent religious culture, and this fact must be taken into account. This pedagogical and cultural challenge is even more marked, in some respects, when teaching history. When I talk about European historical facts, I have no references, including architectural and art history ones, which in the Italian context are an integral part of students' daily life; not to mention how difficult it can be to deal with thorny issues such as the Crusades and the relationship between Christian and Muslim worlds during time. If we consider philosophical issues, dealing with concepts such as modernity, secularism, the "philosophers' God", atheism, the role of religion and the complex relationships it has with philosophy, it requires a surplus of cultural mediation, and a declination that makes these concepts understandable in their widest dimensions.

How to deal with Nietzsche's "God is dead", or Schopenhauer and Marx's atheism, without self-censorship, but handling the subject with care, in order not to offend the sensibilities of those who listen and process this information? Freedom of teaching, enshrined in Article 33 of the Italian Constitution, which we, as Italian teachers represent, must, in any case, keep in mind the context, without failing to present the different positions, and allowing their open discussion, in order to confront ideas, that don't necessarily reflect the students' beliefs. I must confess that it isn't at all easy to find the right balance. However, this is the added value of my current experience, and it forces me to face and consider these cultural differences, to study and learn more about what is happening around me.

Through the art of mediation, I am, for instance, trying to philosophize with other means, which go beyond the presentation of the canonical contents, using films, organising cooperative learning moments, suggesting music texts with a philosophical content, in order to better understand the idea of a philosopher or a concept. I, for example, asked my students to watch *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowski sisters, to better understand Descartes' methodical and hyperbolic doubt; I began a lesson by listening to a rap song, to talk about the feeling of Apathy today, compared to that of Hellenistic philosophy; in other moments the lesson was improvised, and we talked about the meaning of studying during distance learning, letting students discuss freely, and what I discovered was that, despite the convenience of not having to get up early to come to school, they are tired and exhausted by the ongoing lockdown, and they begin to appreciate the beauty of studying together at school.

In these first months of distance learning, I mainly carry out my lessons with the aid of power point presentations, so that students can follow them better. After introducing the most significant concepts of authors or philosophical movement, I try to involve them through questions, but distance learning makes it more difficult, even when they are urged to do so. Sometimes I start my lessons through a stimulus question or a brainstorming, in order to collect ideas or keywords useful for the topic I want to focus on. In tenth grade classes, for example, I introduced the Sophistic philosophers, through some questions on democracy, and on how political majorities and consensus are built, and led students towards the themes developed by the Sophists; or, again, in eleventh grade, while working on the Scientific Revolution, we focused on the transition from the organicistic vision of nature to the mechanistic one, making a foray on contemporary themes of climate change and environmental philosophy (cfr. Merchant, 1988). Through these pedagogical techniques, although I wasn't able to involve the whole class, I, nevertheless, experienced a greater participation.

Finally, in order to try to maintain a dynamic link between the lessons and the students' active reflection, as well as to be able to assess them, I introduced moments of philosophical writing, which were connected to what was treated during the lessons. These exercises are an important moment to detect the students' interest, their acquisition of content, but also to comprehend their personal feelings, views and ways of thinking. Language remains the biggest obstacle, because the linear development of their thoughts largely depends on their mastery of Italian.

5. The social perception of philosophy as "taught knowledge"

5.1. Teaching philosophy in a Turkish-Italian system

As I have already mentioned, the Turkish high school system provides philosophy in almost all Lyceum curricula, and is concentrated in classes 10 and 11, out of the total 12 compulsory ones. The teaching modules, which in Turkey are 45 minutes, are two per week.

Within the Turkish lessons' planning, the topics are quite rigidly divided into units, and specific references, both to texts to be treated and to the goals and skills to be achieved, are set. The themes of the first year of philosophy do not present a historic or by author approach. The different proposals focus mainly on active thinking opportunities, starting from texts of various kinds, and consider specific topics, with the aim of acquiring a methodology of philosophical investigation. The second year, on the other hand, provides for a very ambitious program – considering the small number of weekly modules – and aims to take into account the main topics of the history of philosophy, which include various authors of the Islamic and Turkish tradition too. The program starts from the origins of philosophy, with the classic authors of Miletus, whom in Turkey become Anatolians, passing through Lao Tse, Plato, Aristotle; the next unit is about the main features of Christian philosophy (Augustine and, in particular, the *Confessions*) together with the Islamic tradition (Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroé, Al-Ghazali); furthermore there is a focus on the Scientific Revolution, Kant's duty ethics, Nietzsche's "construction of new values and Will to Power", and, furthermore, some selected texts by Bergson, Sartre, Kuhn and contemporary Turkish philosophers such as Nurretin Topçu, a philosopher of Blondelian training, and Takeyttin Mengüşoğlu, founder of a school of ontological anthropology.

The philosophy curriculum of the Italian school, on the other hand, is based on the National Planning of the Italian Ministry that means the history of philosophy spread out along three school years. Teachers' planning becomes very important, and must take into account the linguistic difficulties, both in the definition of topics, and in the construction of evaluation tests. In fact, a great deal of emphasis needs to be placed on the acquisition of a specific vocabulary and on encouraging, as far as possible, moments of active reflection during which linguistic skills are intertwined with the knowledge of authors and philosophical themes, rather than demanding a pure content learning, as it can be expected in an Italian context. Sharing the choices with colleagues who teach the same subject

is essential, because the Turkish system provides two common written tests per year, which are considered, in fact, the only moment of official evaluation. The other assessments, oral or written, converge in a generic "performance" grade. This rigidity therefore obliges teachers to stick to a timetable, when discussing the topics in class, so that students can easily pass the exams, which determine their quarterly and final grade.

5.2. How is studying Philosophy perceived?

Only a few months since my arrival in Istanbul have passed, and it is quite difficult to describe how students perceive studying philosophy, but I will try to outline some "first impressions". At the beginning of the year, I started a discussion with the students whom have studied it for one or two years. I asked the students to tell me whether studying philosophy was interesting or not. Overall, what came out is a benevolent and proactive attitude towards the subject, although a substantial majority complained about some difficulties in following the lessons, and memorizing concepts and authors.

After a few weeks, spent reviewing and discussing what they had learned during the previous years, I assigned homework: the student had to express their own ideas about philosophy. Reading through their texts, we move from a general interest for philosophical questions, to annoyance with its inconclusiveness, its lack of "objectivity", and the fact that it does not offer definitive and certain answers. More specifically, philosophy is seen as a subject that «helps developing critical thinking», but it is also seen as a demonstration of «human arrogance» in its claim to want to know the unknowable. A student, for example, used the beautiful expression «to scratch the surface of the universe» to account for this craving and its inevitable failure. On the other hand, what appears as an inevitable failure becomes, in the words of another student, the stimulus «to seek more and more, and accept how little is known». Another one highlights the need to «think as the premise of every action», because «nothing can be done without thinking», therefore philosophy becomes a necessary «science of thinking», that is «incorporated into life» and is «a vehicle for developing our own way of being». One delightful expression, among those used to describe what philosophy studies, was the one that describes it as the study of the «most thoughtful people» of a certain time, which reminded me of Hans Blumenberg's concepts of "thoughtfulness" and "metaphorology" (see Blumenberg, 2006).

In 10th grade classes, three months after the beginning of their first exchange with philosophy as a school subject, I asked the students to look for a quote and an image, which for them would represent a definition

of it. What follows are some of the students' comments, which, in my opinion, have something in common: the idea that practicing philosophy is something human, natural, especially when it is an exercise of free critical thinking. Philosophy «revolves around asking questions», it is a certain «kind of confusion», «a leap, a plunge into human potential», a way of being «lost in thoughts», but also a way of «trying to understand feared things», because by facing these fears a person «unexpectedly slips into philosophy». Someone sees philosophy lessons as the possibility of «building an environment free from judgment», a place where «there are no right or wrong answers» and where practicing philosophy «helps to create and develop a consciousness»; «not a knowledge, but a way of learning how to question, research, let different opinions conflict». Of course, there is no lack of critical judgments on its uselessness, its wanderings in the void, but a majority of the students, whom have just given their first peek to the philosophical scene, experience it as an opportunity to rediscover the curiosity of «trying to understand the essence» of what involves them, something that, too often, is buried by the duties of a certain setting of the work at school.

I believe that it is precisely from this ambivalent perception of studying philosophy, that I must draw precious hints on how to act out content and methodological choices, and help the students develop what can be useful for them in the future, and allow them to make informed choices.

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