

Methodological experimentation in the teaching of Social Communication: “Biographeme with the beat generation”

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Abstract

This report results from the research “Methodological experimentation in the teaching of Social Communication”. Considering that such research has teaching as an object, it tries to propose different teaching methodologies, and here presents the second one of them: “Biographeme with the beat generation”. The report is justified because it discusses a method of the sciences that have the text as protagonist; and because it is inserted in the discussion involving the relation between teaching and research. It conceives as method the notion expressed by Barthes (2004a), which says that when the research deals with texts, the result is not presented by a text, but it is the text in itself. The experimentation assumes that the text of the beat generation is of the biographematic type, so that students are encouraged to write in the beats way. Finally, we conclude that the experienced methodology is capable of provoking the student to perceive the text in a new way.

Keywords: Methodological experimentation. Teaching in Social Communication. Biographeme. Beat generation. Barthes.

Introduction – The research itself becomes text

We conceive this report of experience as a result of our research project titled “Methodological experimentation in the teaching of Social Communication”. Such project makes teaching an object of research. Thus, when teaching the course Writing and Speaking 1, we tried different teaching methodologies, and in this opportunity, we present the second¹ experiment, entitled “Biographeme with the beat generation”.

When we say “present”, we immediately enter into the question of the method, since in the methodological conception of both the aforementioned project and this report, results are not separated from the research itself; that is, there is no research and then the results, but instead, these are the text of the research itself. According to Barthes (2004a, p.393 – Our translation), “from the moment a research concerns the text (...) the research itself becomes the text”. In other words, when the research deals with scriptures, the result is not presented by a text, but constitutes *itself* as the text. This means that the idea of presentation *should*

1 The first of the experiments is titled “Haicai on Twitter”.

not be taken in the sense of using this report only as a way of publishing what was produced on the experimental occasion. That is why, in the first line, we affirm that “we conceive this report as an outcome” and not as a formal way of presenting a result.

Still on this, Barthes (2004a, p.393 – Our translation) affirms that the research “should not forget its condition of language, whatever it is that is being searched for” (the notions of “text” and “language” are, in this perspective, inseparable). There is no research on one side and the language on the other, since the former is constituted by the latter. It is not, however, only a matter of hermeneutics, for it is not enough to say that the truth is language: it is, however, about knowing this and producing language. This is why the historical role of research is “to teach the scholar that he *speaks*” (p.393 – Emphasis in original, our translation); if the scholar speaks, he/she produces something differential, something that necessarily departs from the *thing*. If this happens it is not due to a methodological flaw, but, on the contrary, it is due to the fact that the only thing we can do is text. Hence the Barthesian affirmation (2004a, p.397 – Our translation) that the text is “the only ‘true’ result of any research”.

If Leonardo da Vinci, for example, continues to have value – even though many of his results have been overcome – it is because his true result is precisely his text. Results, in the traditional sense, are always dependent on established according: “in what axiomatic field the highlighted fact, the evidenced sense, the statistical discovery will be placed?” (BARTHES, 2004a, p.393 – Our translation); what references are presupposed? Once such agreements are suspended, they lose their values; and what remains is only language.

Justification – Teaching as a research incentive

This enterprise is justified in three scopes: in the methodological (1), in the teaching-research relation (2) and in the classroom (3).

1) The areas that fall within the Human Sciences, Social Sciences and/or Applied Social Sciences face, veiled or not, the challenge of doing research using as indicators the terminologies of Positive Sciences (“results”, “validities”, “conclusions”) (that is why, although we are appropriating a notion of method distinct from the positive notion, we maintain, in the structure of the account, the canonical sections: “Introduction”, “Justification”, “Method”, etc.). In one way or another, they end up having to deal with adaptations and analogies, which, of course, is nothing new. If we now bring up this question, it is only in the sense of defending the relevance of the present work; after all, if such a question is indeed admitted as representing a nuisance and embarrassment (after all, we always have the impression that we are *behind* the Positives), then a research, such as the present one, that implies a method of the sciences that have the language as main character, becomes relevant; at least, as material for methodological discussions/polemics;

2) Within the Brazilian universities, there is a concern to establish direct relationships between teaching and research. Given this, we justify this report because it is inserting itself in this discussion that, independently of anything, is a current one. We deal with a process that implies this relationship, because we see teaching as a privileged source of research materials;

3) If teaching provides materials for this research (especially from what students do, which ultimately instigates the researcher), this research, in turn, instigates students to produce texts in the classroom, which thus becomes a privileged place of experimentation and a research environment. The production of texts, in turn, becomes relevant in that it places the student in a situation where creation is no longer an option and becomes a necessity. There is no authoritative relationship, but an exercise one.

Method – Experimentation and fantasy

In a section entitled “The method”, Barthes (2004a, p.396 – Our translation) states that, traditionally, “the method becomes a Law; but since this Law is deprived of any effect that is heterogeneous to it (no one can say what would be in ‘human sciences’ a ‘result’), it is infinitely frustrated”. Any effect that is external to the method ends up constraining it; the consequence is the frustration caused by the awareness that it will never achieve the required rigor. Although participating “in the vanity of all metalanguage” (p.396 – Our translation), everything is concentrated in itself, “nothing remains for the scripture²; the researcher keeps repeating that his text will be methodological, but this text never arrives”. It is to deviate from this conception that Barthes (2004a) presents the method not as a means of arriving at a result, but as a construction of the result itself. On the one hand, there is a method that says: “we will do so to arrive at such a conclusion”; on the other, there is another method which, in saying this, is already in the record of the actual production.

Taking the idea that the methodology leads to the elaboration of the method, we use the expression “methodology” for the case of the activity carried out in the classroom, and “method” for the case of the research. So far we can see, therefore, that we have focused on the question of the method, since we have been focused on research and not on the organization of experiments in the classroom. Care must be taken not to make this confusion because, although the perspective is the same, its functioning is not. The experimentation in the classroom conducts the method, since the constitutive text of the research is produced from it. That is, if the events of teaching have a special interest here, it is because they trigger the production of this text.

2 “Scripture” is the text that counts for itself, regardless of its content. In this account, we understand that all scripture is a text, but not every text becomes a scripture.

In order to experiment with different methodologies in the classroom, we are based on two notions: that of experimentation, which is due to the thoughts of Deleuze (1988); and that of placing a fantasy, which is due to the thoughts of Barthes (1989).

Deleuze (1988) is an author who, between interpretation and experimentation, always stays with the second. While the former provides new possibilities, but not without preserving the object, the latter is placed in a situation where even the initial object can be abandoned. The main thing is the idea that what works once may not work anymore; and that, therefore, it is up to the experimenter (in this case, the professor), each semester, to invent new methodologies. That is why the experiment "Biogramme with the beat generation" will not be repeated in other semesters; or if it is, it will involve another scope of experimental registration. It is not enough to say that there is no manual, it is necessary to experiment all the time, even if this obviously implies the risk of failure. By the way, the interesting aspect about experimentation lies in this impossibility of control and prediction; if, on the other hand, there was a guarantee of success, then we would no longer be in the experimental scope. Barthes (2004b, p.415 – Our translation), although not confused with Deleuze's record, also ends up showing, in a section entitled "Disappointment", that since the lesson is a game/theater, there is always the possibility of disappointment.

The experimentation, in the methodology we propose, occurs from three points of view: from the point of view of the professor who experiences a methodology in teaching; from the point of view of the students who experience text production (students are encouraged to write biogrammes); and from the point of view of the professor trying to produce the present text from the experimentation of the first point of view (this third one witness the moment of fusion of the professor and researcher functions).

As for the notion of placing a fantasy, Barthes (1989, p.43 – Our translation), in *Aula*, states:

What I would like to renew, in each of the years that I will be teaching here, is the way to present the class or seminar. (...) For what can be oppressive in a teaching is not the knowledge or the culture that it links, but the discursive forms through which it is proposed.

What we are interested in is the proposal to renew each semester, not necessarily the content of the component, but the way of expressing it (which is why the main question is in the methodology). What can oppress a component is not "scholarly content", "always the same content" or "what is the usefulness of this content?", but it is the way to deal with it. In this case, the beat generation and the way we relate to it (the proposed mode, as we have said, is experimental) matters less. On this, says Barthes (1989, p.44 – Our translation):

Therefore, I would like the speech and listening to be interwoven here to be similar to the comings and goings of a child who plays around the mother, departing from her, then returning to bring her a pebble, a piece of string, and thereby tracing around a calm center a whole locus of play within which the pebble, the string come to matter less than the enthusiastic gift made of them.

The importance of renewal, of reinvention, lies in the fact that, in Barthes's view (1989, p.44 – Our translation), teaching involves the placement of a fantasy: “I sincerely believe that at the origin of a teaching like this, one must always accept a fantasy, which can vary from year to year”. The fantasy ceases to be problematic when it *passes*; that is, when it is ephemeral, lasting only until the game ends, until it is *not interesting anymore*. Science can be born of a fantasy, as long as it is understood as the adventure of seeking what we want.

It is a fantasy (...) that the professor must return annually, when deciding on the meaning of his trip; in this way, he deviates from the place where they expect him, which is the place of the Father, always dead (...), since only the son has fantasy, only the son is alive (BARTHES, 1989, p.45 – Our translation).

The “place of the Father” is the place of the one who *already knows*; if “the son is alive” is because he is still looking for, he still holds the place of the one who sees that the great part is always being invented. In this case, “it is fair to say that this method is also a Fiction” (BARTHES, 1989, p.42-43 – Our translation).

In another text, titled *Au Séminaire*, Barthes (2004b, p.422 – Emphasis in original, our translation) reaffirms that the task of teaching has much less to do with knowing and much more with *involvement*: “teaching *what happens only once*, what a contradiction in terms! Is not teaching always repeating?”. Sometimes, the professor brings an explanation that has already been given in many other semesters, but which has never brought about the effect it now provokes. This is precisely because the main matter is less in the content of the explanation and more in the way the participants engage with it. This means that what is repeated is only the explanation, not the teaching event, which occurs only once.

Faced with this, our fantasy of the semester in question is to produce research based on methodological experiments in the teaching of Social Communication. Regardless of whether we succeed or not, we take advantage of the procedure used by Barthes (2005b, p.41 – Our translation) when in doubt whether his *Preparation of the Novel* would lead him to actually write a novel: “Will I really make a Novel? I just answer this: I’ll act as if I’m going to do one => I will settle in this as if”. To deal with this fantasy, we propose to the class that they try to produce biographemes with the beat literature.

The notion of biographeme

We find this notion in Barthes (1984, 2004c, 2005a, 2005c). In this section, we present it, since it is the theoretical consistency of the teaching methodology that we propose here. The methodology appropriates beat literature in the same way that Barthes (2005a) appropriates Marquis de Sade, Charles Fourier, and Inácio de Loyola, in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (in a way that we call biographematic): instead of dwelling on the elements in that each one of these authors is recognized (pornography: Sade, utopian socialism: Fourier, mystic of the obedience: Loyola), Barthes stops in something hitherto not perceived, inventing a new Sade, a new Fourier and a new Loyola. He frames Sade, for example, not through pornography, but from details that until then were dull and devoid of senses.

In short, *the idea of the methodology is to inventory biographematics traits of the works or of the beats authors, so as to make them biographematic scripture; or inventory biographematics traits of our own lives to use the same procedure that beats used.*

We must now make a distinction between biographematics traits, biographematic scripture and biographemes. 1) Traits are details that go unnoticed by biographers and researchers in general (for example, the white muff of Sade), precisely because they are empty of prior meaning. These traits, in Barthes' perspective, can become text triggers (when something that touches us still does not make sense, we are awakened); 2) Biographematic scripture is precisely the text that was triggered by biographematics traits; therefore, a future body; 3) Biographeme, on the other hand, is the biographematic trait produced in the scripture (for example, the fact that Dean, an *On the Road* character (KEROUAC, 2010a), smooths the belly while speaking).

The drawing then becomes the following: (1) biographematics traits (something that touches us, but has no previous meaning and can come from a work and from life itself – here there are no distinctions between fiction and reality) => (2) biographematic scripture (text not only triggered by traits, but also full of biographemes) => (3) biographeme (details left by a biographematic type of scripture, which begin to function, from the point of view of the reader: they are the ones who start firing new texts after all). Biographematics traits and biographemes are confused and even merged, using the first expression to refer to the beginning of the biographematic procedure and the second one to refer to the end. From the point of view of the one who produces a biographematic scripture, the biographeme is its result (it is the end); but from the point of view of the one who reads such scripture and who, through it, wishes to write, the biographeme is its beginning, since it functions as the biographematic trait that puts it to produce a new text. There is still the possibility that a biographematic trait has never been a biographeme, since it is not produced by a scripture, but is simply perceived in life.

In this sense, having the intention of inventorying biographematics traits is always legitimate, and may constitute one of the moments involved in the proposed teaching

methodology (if we use the expression “inventorying” for this task, it is because, from the beginning, the task is not limited to “identifying”; in other words: *the invention does not occur only after the identification of traces, but it always occurs*). However, the same intentionality does not work with the biographeme: although we intend to produce the biographematic scripture, there is no way to predict it, since there is no way of knowing whether a text will be conceived as biographematic (this task concerns the effects that a text may or may not provoke in your reader).

It is also important to make a distinction between biographeme and biography: while biography presupposes meanings, the biographeme does not. The potency of a biographeme is its proliferation in new texts; the power (or impotence) of biography is to establish the ultimate, true, meaningful life. In this sense, the biographematic procedure can be understood as a way of dealing with the biography without limiting itself to the referenced history, which, in other words, means the Subject’s life history.

Barthes (2005c) also distinguishes the biographer from the biographologist: the former is the one who makes life history; the latter is the one who writes of life. In this case, when a writer invents lives it is more appropriate that we call him a biographologist. In proposing this methodology, we want students to function, precisely, as biographologists.

The biographematics traits, as we have already suggested, are insignificant details transformed into text triggers. They are what instigate a text and that work on enchanting the reader-writer. These are cases of inflections: *what goes unnoticed by the various interpretations ends up being valued in the new scripture*. In the words of Barthes (2005a, p.XVII – Our translation):

If I were a writer, already dead, I would like my life to be reduced, by the care of a friendly and thoughtful biographer, to some details, to some tastes, to some inflections, say: ‘biographemes’ whose distinction and mobility could travel out of any fate and come to touch, in the manner of the Epicurian atoms, some future body, promised to the same dispersion; a bumpy life, in short, how Proust knew how to write his work.

What passes for the work of an author (Proust, for example) can be understood as his life, but it is a disoriented life, which does not coincide with the life of conventional biographies, precisely because it consists of details that find themselves out of the generally considerable facts: the life of Proust being reinvented (rediscovered), by the protagonist of *In Search of Lost Time* (1967), from the sensation provoked by tasting a simple scone dipped in a cup of tea. The biographeme, as Campos (2006) says, happens when life and work are found, they become indiscernible. It is the encounter between fiction and reality, between imaginary and history.

Another element to be highlighted is the sensual aspect of biographemes, signaled by Barthes (2005c): the biographemes invite and even seduce the reader to produce a new text. It is at this point that the reader perceives something never perceived before and begins to wish to write a new text. That is why, even though it is impossible to predict the production of biographemes, it is still perfectly legitimate to say that this uncertain production that is precisely the engine of a biographematic procedure.

The biographematic scripture of the beat generation

If the idea of the methodology is to inventory biographematics traits of beats works or authors to make biographemes with them, it is because we understand that most of the works of this generation are made up of biographematics scriptures.

According to Willer (2009), Kerouac recovers the subject, in the sense that, after structuralism shows that the subject is indeed multiple, off-centered and flexible, using it had become forbidden, so it became difficult to speak in "I" and not seeming to be intellectually naive. However, Kerouac (2010a; 2010b) and other beats authors can, for the most part, operate it without making it an appreciation of personal identity. We defend the idea that if the beats achieve this it is because they do, precisely, a biographematic scripture, in which it is no longer a subject even when the "I" remains there.

The Cat Inside, by Burroughs (2010), can be understood as a biographical book; but in this case it is a bad book because it cannot achieve what we expect from a biography: the opportunity for the reader to get to know the biographical subject better. Although the biographeme has nothing to do with confusing the reader, what is revealed in him is not the subject, but it is the scripture. If we consider this book a biographematic scripture, it is because, despite being triggered by situations supposedly lived by the author, it is not reduced to them; on the contrary, their importance is reduced from the moment they provoked the text. The relationship between the cat and the biographologist Burroughs makes him simply write.

Satori in Paris (KEROUAC, 2010b) is not a book about a trip made by the author himself, but it is a book written *because of* a trip. In the end, it does not matter *what* Kerouac did in Paris; what is left are the "romantic raincoats" (p.36 – Our translation), the hat used at the theater exits, Spinoza's eye (p.93 – Our translation): they are biographemes that need a pretext to emerge.

Early on, Kerouac (2010b, p.8 – Our translation) states: this story "is told for no other reason than fellowship, which is another definition (and my favorite one) of literature, (...) and to teach something religious, or religious reverence, about real life, in this real world that literature should reflect (and here it does)". This is precisely because it is not a description of a *satori*, but a description of what happened, which in one way or another made possible small or big ideas. If here we call these ideas biographemes it is because

they are constituted by elements provided in the events of life (hence “bio”) and because they do not present themselves as significant and meaningful facts (as would be the case in biographical writing), but only as sketched, bent, suspended details (hence, “grapheme”).

If Dean Moriarty, the protagonist of *On the Road* (KEROUAC, 2010a), goes after the slang of New York intellectuals, it is only because he believes that from there he can understand what he has not yet experienced. In addition, Sal Paradise (character/narrator) creates his own biographemes to appropriate the other characters: Dean, “the holy, glittering-minded tramp” (p.24 – Our translation); Carlo Marx, “the anguished tramp poet with a dark mind ” (p.24 – Our translation); Dean’s “bony and well-carved face” (p.206 – Our translation); “with the mad bony face covered in sweat; the veins dilated, repeating ‘yes, yes, yes’, without stopping” (p.241 – Our translation). These are drawings and not representational descriptions.

One frequent type of biographeme on *On the Road* (KEROUAC, 2010a) is what we call *geographeme*, which refers to biographemes of places: “there is something gray and sacred in the East, while California is clear as the clothes on the clothesline and has an empty mind” (p.107 – Our translation); “in New York it gets freaking cold in the winter, but in the streets, somewhere, there’s a crazy feeling of camaraderie” (p.115 – Our translation); “in Frisco, everyone blows an instrument. It was the end of the continent, no one cared about anything” (p.221 – Our translation); “wow, the nights of Frisco, the limit of the continent and the end of all doubts, goodbye stupid and foolish doubts!” (p.249 – Our translation). We keep, in the *geographemes*, what we have of a place!

A biographeme is absolutely unique; but, precisely for this reason, it has an axiomatic effect of universality: “the old man shouted. But the opinion of the brunette, fat and melancholic mother prevailed once again, as is always the case among the great peoples of the world” (KEROUAC, 2010a, p.130 – Our translation). It is not a question of agreeing or not with this; we are not within the scope of opinion and not even of reflection, but of scripture. Another example: “everyone goes home in October” (p.135 – Our translation). Undoubtedly, a feeling that touches only the character, but assumes the position of an unquestioned and sovereign truth. “It was a rainy night. It was the myth of the rainy night” (p.164 – Our translation).

Considering that a biographeme can even start from ready meanings, but that what characterizes it is from another scope, it is never only made of metaphors or other figures of speech. Dean and Sal, but above all the first, see the *thing itself*, the concreteness. A pure look that has nothing to do with angelic purity, but with a process of deconstruction of meaning: “I was enjoying a fantastic season and the whole world was opening up to me because I had no dreams” (p.314 – Our translation). It is because of this dilution of senses that, for example, the Mexican child, simply standing there, can be conceived by them as the most wonderful one in the world!

The experimentation: “Biographeme with the beat generation”

In terms of procedures, the methodology involves six classes and occurs as follows:

First lesson: presentation of the beat generation through the preface of *On the Road*, written by Bueno (2010). Recommendation of the reading of beat generation works (each student chooses one of the books to read until the fifth lesson). Introduction of a group activity to be carried out in the next class: each group brings the biography of one of the authors of the beat generation, to present it to the class: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Carl Solomon, Michael McClure and Gary Snyder.

Second class: reading of fragments of *On the Road* (KEROUAC, 2010a) that mention the expression “beat generation”. Presentation of biographies. Recommendation of the reading of the text “Beat, Beat Generation”, from the book *Beat Generation*, by Willer (2009 – Our translation).

Third class: conversation about the beginning of the books. Discussion of the text “Beat, Beat Generation”, of the mentioned book (WILLER, 2009 – Our translation). Division of the class in the same groups of the previous activity: each two groups are responsible for studying one of the texts Willer’s book (2009) to present it in the next class.

Fourth lesson: presentation of one of the texts of the book.

Fifth lesson: study of the notion of biographeme, in Barthes (1984; 2004c; 2005a; 2005c).

Sixth lesson: biographematic scripture activity: producing texts, in the manner of the beats, from details: 1) one triggered by the description of a journey – as, for example, by *Satori in Paris* (KEROUAC, 2010b); 2) one triggered by an idea that appeared in a youth situation – in the way of fragments, for example, by *On the Road* (2010a); 3) one triggered by a trial – in the manner, for example, of *The Yage Letters* (BURROUGHS; GINSBERG, 2008); 4) one triggered by living with animals – in the manner, for example, of *The Cat Inside* (BURROUGHS, 2010); 5) one triggered by a biographematic trait of the biography of one of the beats authors; 6) one triggered by a biographematic trait of a character from one of the beats books. After the activity, each student chooses, among the six texts, the one that considers more powerful to deliver it “finished” next week.

Once this procedure is performed, we report here, through two points, the experimentation itself (in order to highlight some aspects of the student’s experience and the contribution of the methodology to the course). These points lead us, at the end of the article, to two conclusions:

1) How the methodology was perceived by the students: even if the experimentation is biographematic, it implies the biography. This ended up acting as a decoy, since the students showed interest in the life histories of young Americans inclined to the underground

experiences. Regardless of whether the students wish such experiences for themselves, the point is that they caught their attention. On the other hand, we noticed, in the students, great difficulty in appropriating the beats characters in a way that was disconnected from the life histories of the subjects who supposedly instigated the creation of these characters. However, it is precisely this difficulty that makes the biographematic experimentation interesting, since this requires that we give up, although only temporarily, the reasoning based on the personal identity and the idea that fiction only represents the reality, a very dear reasoning to the western thought;

2) How the methodology contributed to the achievement of the learning objectives of the course: the course Writing and Speaking 1 aims, among other objectives, to enable the student to try different forms of text, in order to understand that the text is not simply the written speech. In this sense, the experimentation we propose contributed, although at different levels – to consider the different types of involvement on the part of the students –, with the construction of a notion of text – a notion that we call scripture – that differs substantially from other notions by emerging from a non-modern thought, above all, by not differentiating truth (reality) from untruth (fiction) and by transgressing the almost sacred role of the Subject.

Conclusions

Although it is not a question of a conclusion described as positive results (mainly due to the methodological conception presented here), we can propose the following conclusions regarding this methodological experimentation in teaching:

1) The methodology, despite having resistances, is capable of provoking the student to perceive the text in a new way: the intransitive way. From the moment the student notices that a text does not simply or necessarily means transmitting information (and therefore can have a value in itself), writing tends to become non-bureaucratic in the sense that text goes beyond the function of only allowing content to be registered or published.

2) This perception becomes possible precisely because the theme of biographematic scripture emphasizes not the form of content, but the form of expression, which means that the emphasis is less on *what is being discussed* and more on the text itself, or *in the way it expresses content*. In other words, it is not a question of the student writing *about* a content learned in the course, but of writing about what instigates him/her, because what is taught, instead of being the content to be written, is the form of expression, which is not apprehended but experienced.

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