

# **The university professor's authority: a study focused on language arts students' accounts**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents some conclusions of an investigation of professors' authority, from the perspective of students about to complete their studies at an Argentinean public university. This work is written along the line of investigation about university experience, directed by Dr. Sandra Carli in the Education and Society Area of Instituto Gino Germani – Facultad de Ciencias Sociales – Universidad de Buenos Aires. The text focuses on language arts students from the Facultad de Humanidades y Artes de la Universidad Nacional de Rosario (Faculty of Humanities and Arts of the National University of Rosario). The prioritised data collection technique was semi-structured interviews with contributions of life stories. As a general conclusion, student accounts show a delegitimization of traditional student–teacher relationships based on hierarchical authority and the recognition of multiple characteristics of authority in some professors, such as knowledge of the discipline, academic recognition within the field and professorial charisma. Additionally, the authority of the past, the author and the book as an object are emphasised. Finally, the legitimacy granted to the Bachelor of Arts figure is revealed, along with the consequent discredit that falls upon high school teaching, which is the most frequent career prospect among language arts graduates.

## **Keywords**

Authority – University professors – Students.

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# **La autoridad de los profesores universitarios: un estudio centrado en relatos de estudiantes de letras**

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## **Resumen**

*En este artículo se presentan algunas conclusiones de un trabajo de investigación centrado en explorar la autoridad de los profesores desde la perspectiva de estudiantes próximos a culminar sus estudios en una universidad pública argentina. Trabajo que se inscribe en la línea de investigación sobre experiencia universitaria dirigida por la Dra. Sandra Carli en el área de educación y sociedad del Instituto Gino Germani (Facultad de Ciencias Sociales – Universidad de Buenos Aires). Específicamente, el texto se centra en estudiantes de la carrera de letras, perteneciente a la Facultad de Humanidades y Artes de la Universidad Nacional de Rosario. La técnica de recolección de datos priorizada fue la entrevista semi-estructurada con aportes de los relatos de vida. Como conclusión general se afirma que en los relatos de los estudiantes se expresa tanto una deslegitimación de los vínculos asentados en diferencias jerárquicas, como el reconocimiento de múltiples atributos de autoridad en algunas figuras profesoras. En el proceso de autorización de los profesores predominan características vinculadas al saber disciplinar, al reconocimiento académico dentro del campo y al carisma. Asimismo, se destaca el peso que en esta carrera tiene la autoridad del pasado, la autoridad del autor y del objeto libro. Por último, se pone de manifiesto la legitimidad otorgada a la figura del licenciado en letras, con el consecuente desprestigio que recae sobre la figura del profesor de escuela secundaria, siendo esta última la salida laboral más frecuente entre los egresados de la carrera.*

## **Palabras clave**

*Autoridad – Profesores universitarios – Estudiantes.*

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## Introduction

This study presents some conclusions of an investigation, which resulted in a doctoral thesis, of university students' views about professors' authority. Conducted within the doctoral scholarships framework of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), the thesis is based on collective research projects addressing the public university's past and present from a socio-cultural perspective. Understanding this institution as a complex combination of structures, traditions, identities, experiences and events that demand description and narration from the research perspective (CARLI, 2008) gives rise to exploration of authority as a central aspect of student's experience in the contemporary university.<sup>1</sup>

We believe the heterogeneity of faculties that are a part of universities, thereby implying institutional characteristics, differentiated task-framing and knowledge areas, influences students' considerations about professors' authority. This leads us to adopt a particular analytical perspective. Therefore, we limit this inquiry to one of the studied cases: students about to complete their undergraduate language arts studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Arts of the National University of Rosario.

Outside a legitimisation process of certain features, attributes, principles, practices and meanings that exist in a context of interpretations by subjects localised in specific institutions, and with the understanding that unrecognised authority does not exist, we proposed to investigate the forms these processes assume during professors' careers in language arts.

**1-** CONICET 5889 Projects *Narrativas de estudiantes universitarios y sus familias sobre la experiencia educativa en el tiempo presente. Transformaciones del sentido de la educación (2005-2009)* y UBACYT S003 *La experiencia universitaria. Estudios sobre la Universidad pública (2008-2011)*. Both projects were directed by Dr. Sandra Carli in the Research Institute Gino Germani, Faculty of Social Sciences, UBA (University of Buenos Aires).

This investigation's problem was configured in a dialogue area between various disciplines in social sciences. In this way, pedagogy, psychoanalysis, political philosophy, education philosophy and sociology offered conceptual contributions from which we construct our object—the nature of authority in tertiary language arts studies.

Opting for a qualitative methodology, we recovered some paradigm inputs of the social sciences narrative because our interest lay in analysing the views students attributed, through oral accounts, to authority figures.

Object construction was organised according to the following corpus:

- Review of bibliography from the mentioned disciplines.
- Semi-structured interviews of language arts students about to complete their undergraduate studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Arts at the National University of Rosario.
- Semi-structured interviews with the selected careers directors to account for relevant aspects of institutional dynamics and the general framework in which university education occurs.
- Semi-structured interviews of widely experienced professors to obtain details about specific aspects of institutional culture and to clarify certain issues regarding disciplinary peculiarities.
- Documents of educational policy and institutional policy: Higher Education Law, Statute of the National University of Rosario, Board Minutes and so on.
- Historical documents on the National University of Rosario.

In the face of this corpus, we must point out the interviews' centrality to the students. In this case, we used the semi-structured interview technique with contributions from life stories (BERTAUX, 2005).

This inquiry is retrospective, not longitudinal. We began from a given present (2009 and 2010), and from there, we directed interviews towards recovery of past experiences.

Fieldwork was performed in two instances. First, it focused on interviews with students from each faculty of the National University of Rosario: A body of 15 interviews provided not only data for the first theoretical settings, thus confronting the conceptual framework investigated through the interviewee categories, but it was also crucial in careers selection. Second, considering criteria of theoretical saturation (GLASER AND STRAUSS, 1967), 45 interviews with physics, language arts and accountant students were performed: 22 women and 23 men, aged from 23 to 26. Various student profiles were considered: students from small towns and from Rosario; those who completed high school in public and private schools; and activists and non-activists in student political associations. In this way, we collated stories expressing various socialisation and training experiences.

This paper is organised as follows. First, we briefly state its theoretical perspective, including information about the link between authority and recognition concepts. In the following sections, we analyse teaching authority only from the language arts students' perspectives.

### **Authority from a recognition perspective**

The notion of authority is not simple to define. It is often associated with power, frequently with domination and sometimes with violence. The notion of authority is also used to discuss relationships of respect and admiration toward others, as well as on situations with arbitrary features. Authority is too often conflated with fear and enabling with authorisation and authoritarianism.

To unravel this complexity and provide some distinctive features of authority, credibility and recognition operations inherent to the act of authorising have been emphasised along different theoretical lines (KOJÈVE, 2004; DE CERTEAU, 2006a; RICOEUR, 2008).

Considering that no authority exists without recognition by others, a double operation occurs: on one side, the idea of domination or arbitrary exercise of power with which authority is usually associated becomes tempered. On the other side, the link between authority and recognition, and the idea of relationship implied in that link, distances us from the pretension of actually finding essentialist definitions. Thus, from this perspective, far from considering authority as a phenomenon located in a particular subject or as a possession of fact, authority is articulated through validation or approval processes external to itself. In other words, authority itself does not imply principles, but attributes, qualities and recognised features. Thus, it requires recognition, belief and confidence for someone to become – to another or others – an authority.

Having said that, these recognised principles also depend on the subjects' interests. Furthermore, the principles assume a certain regularity in terms of belief systems that form in various social and institutional areas.

In connection with the social area, and for a long time in education, it was possible to identify a number of features associated with authority figures. Among them, permanence in time and *knowing more* occupied a central place; in other words, experience and knowledge constituted authority in the socio-educational realm. These are features that present clear transformation signs in contemporary societies in general and in higher education institutions in particular.

Without being exhaustive, it is worth noting that some phenomena are the basis for such transformation. First, mid-twentieth century anti-authoritarian and anti-institutional positions, which advocate dissolution of hierarchies, also lead to a cycle in which authority must be constantly validated and justified and in which experience and authority become distorted.

Characteristic of the last decades of the twentieth century, social and cultural

transformations indicate individualisation processes that stress the notion of authority focused on cultural transmission. Thus, the subject increasingly appears as a kind of *self-fulfilled* sovereign who seems not to have transmitted experiences against which reveal. Thus, a continual search for references and a plea to authorities to take full charge of their responsibilities are on the agenda. From Sennett's perspective (1982), a strong, solid, guaranteed and stable force becomes the basis of authority. Particularly, young people seem to express discredit towards authorities and demand their regulation. This demand is closely linked to the perception of indifference on behalf of adult world leaders, to the phenomena of early autonomy and to the heteronomy extension in advanced age. In this sense, the current problem regarding authority seems not to lie in (patriarchal) authority and the struggle for emancipation from it, but in new forms of dependence caused by its decline (ZIZEK, 2007).

From the sociological record and focusing on contemporary educational institutions, Dubet (2006) refers to the authority redefinition processes visible in such institutions. Dubet suggests the passage of authority held by authorised external instances (e.g. universal values, rules, established positions) to others in which the subjects' – and, here specifically, the professors' – personality occupies a privileged place. In these terms, professorial authority seems to emerge from subject-as-executor of a particular performance more than from an actor immersed in and supported by an institutional frame. This situation implies more uncertain authority forms, subject to involved parties' negotiations. In this context, the subjects' participation is of increasing importance in career construction. We are facing less unitary social identities, to a lesser extent, defined in relation to totalizing instances and to learning proposed roles; therefore, social identities are prone to unique experiences.

## **Professors' authority from language arts students' perspectives**

### **Up and down the pedestal**

Here, students interpreted authority as a relationship between unequal positions, based on mutual recognition between the parties. The idea of reciprocity involved receiving something in return for granting authority: respect, attention, recognition. Young people in this study seemed to say, 'I respect a professor if he/she respects me. I recognise him/her symbolically; therefore, I grant him/her authority if recognition is reciprocal'.

Additionally, there is evidence for a rebuttal of hierarchical relationships, that is, recognition towards those professors who treat students as equals and position themselves as *one of them*. The expression *to take somebody off the pedestal* is brought into play; several students used this expression when they questioned professors' standing in a place of superiority.

One student's statement is suggestive, referring to an association between asymmetry and imposition:

I don't like the idea that the teacher is standing there and the students are sitting. That's artificial; it's an imposition, in front of 18-year-old guys. ... Dali innovated looking at Christ from above. If he were a teacher, he would teach in a bar or in my house. (Male, 23 years old. Interview 12 April 2009, at a bar near the Humanities and Arts Faculty)

The idea of deinstitutionalisation gains strength in the image evoked by this young man, who refutes modern pedagogical methods focused on different positioning between those who teach and those who learn. But, on the other hand, criticism of authority can also occur when teachers abandon *knowing more*,

positioning themselves *below* the student. Thus, the need for asymmetry is recognised from the point of view of knowledge. The following example is significant:

There are instances that I was afraid to hand in a practical work because I knew that later I was going to see it published [under] the professor's name. ... I had to sit for the exam in which I know the professors do that, and I didn't send my work because I had to send it by email. We did it with a friend and decided not to send the whole work, with the conclusions, because it was about something that had not been investigated. It is a research, I would tell you, we spent six months in an exam that people usually take in a month, and they don't study or study just like that. So we wanted to get something amazing from a horrible subject that was badly taught. That was terrible. We were treated badly. We did almost a research work on a topic that hadn't been taught and that, as we didn't send it, the exam day, they [the professors] were taking notes! 'Sorry, what did you say?' They asked and took notes. (Female, 24 years old. Interview 6 November 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

In other words, when the positions are reversed, with professors revealing their inability to be authorised in disciplinary knowledge, students' disenchantment emerges.

Otherwise, when certain authorised professors display attitudes or assign authoritative actions to command, discipline or highlight hierarchical differences, the violence within authority becomes evident, but the halo protecting some professors exempts them from being impugned. The authority granted to those professors can be linked to academic recognition within the field, to knowledge about the discipline, to strictness in the concepts' transmission or to charisma. Illustrated below

are some of the ambivalent attitudes that were expressed by the students:

I had that professor a year or two before he died. He was already somewhat down in the dumps,<sup>2</sup> but he was still keeping certain folk spice he had. Pretty interesting, but also quite stressful because he was somewhat violent in class, but ... he was interesting and at the same time, he was an absolutely wise man. He shared all he had to say. Although it's true that we have to put up with such verbal violence towards the students and the teaching assistants in the presence of the students. [...] Suddenly, in the development of the class, for example, staring at someone he said: 'What is wrong in what I've said?' And regardless that what he had asked was not complex, the imperative and violent tone made people falter. Well, once the student hesitated, especially if it was a woman, studying dressmaking and that sort of thing. So everyone tried to. ... I, at least, to hide, not to talk to anyone, to sit in places where I couldn't be seen. (Female, 23 years old. Interview 2 November 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

When students believe that they are being trained by a sort of genius, the teacher's aura creates authority that incorporates a certain sense of privilege and tempers the sensation of violence. In other words, the professor's authority grants dignity and interest to an experience that would otherwise be characterised as (overly) authoritarian.

In addition, some professors, far from being taken off the pedestal, are placed there for a variety of reasons, such as who they are, who they are said to be, their knowledge, their way of teaching, their qualifications or their institution of origin. However, that authoritative fragility is also expressed recurrently. As one

**2-** The expression *down in the dumps* indicates that someone is unhappy and depressed.

student noted, 'There are some professors that I put so high on the pedestal and then I am told, at the end, they are not like that. ... There are others who always eternally will be up there, but because they are cool even ideologically...' (Female, 24 years old. Interview 6 November 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts).

Links between teachers and disciples are traversed by idealisations, disappointments, loyalties, betrayals and disillusionment. Since authority is not a substance, but a relationship or an emotional bond, studying it always involves observations of conflicts and variations, rejections and attractions, obedience and disobedience, dependence and independence (ANTELO, 2008).

Someone can be put on a pedestal forever or can be taken off in a second. If we share with Sennett (1982) the idea that authority is based on the search for a solid, guaranteed and stable strength, the slightest evidence that the other does not meet these requirements might be grounds for dissolution of authority.

### Authority in the past

Teachers are not the only ones who occupy pedestals. As in all the *academic tribe* (BECHER, 2001) some writers, objects and literary traditions assume a place of authority within the discipline. Indeed, knowledge must be produced from a base or a transmitted legacy, beyond a break arises with respect thereto. And then, the institution introduces the founding fathers or intellectual leaders who themselves embody the paradox of all authority.

Kojève (2004) finds in traditional authority a variant of the pure case of parental authority, identifying there the notion of collective parenting as a cause. That tradition (literary, in this case) operates for many students as the *perfect model* of writing. Certain canonical authors then act as interdicator judges:

At the moment you sit to write, you feel Borges is looking at you, Rimbaud is

looking at you, Baudelaire is looking at you and José Martí is looking at you, and then, of course, you don't write any more. It's like you feel so judged, it's a totally subjective question because nobody judges you with a pointing finger. ... But it is like all the little ghosts appear around you and your professor, in front of you, talking about how wonderful they were. And it is likely that the student will not write any more, first, because you are not taught how to do it and, secondly, because you are totally overwhelmed by everything that's already been produced. And that, what has already been produced at any given time in history, will surely be better than yours. It's like the poet is in the world and here's the language arts student who studies the poet who goes around the world. ... (Female, 25 years old. Interview 3 May 2010, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

For many language arts students, joining the faculty represents the end of their amateur writing identity. From their perspective, authorities and professors assume the students, who deal with subjects, are provided with certain talents or gifts. This assumption would exempt them from transmission of know-how or, in terms of Dubet (2006), from the *manufacture* of this aptitude. In this way, the faculty receives subjects (readers and writers), but not students:

We don't have any four-monthly production workshop. You have to know how to write because you are a language arts student. We all hand in papers, we go to conferences and nobody ever explains the way to hand in. There are some protocol issues—who will explain them? Someone who went through the same experience, but within the University, it is overlooked. For example, you can coordinate a literary workshop; as a language arts student you have the divine gift of being able to have a writing workshop in which poetry is

produced, but you never had a workshop production during your career. (Female, 22 years old. Interview 21 May 2010, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

Concomitantly, an identity as a writer bestows added value on some students, which then transforms into a distinction, an authority that allows them to interact with professors in another way, with a higher degree of confidence. As one young woman said, 'Do you know who most dares to speak? A section of students who are men and who are still in the career and are brilliant, but generally they are poets, writers. ...'

That previous identity (in the case above, related to gender) seems to be interpreted as ability independent of university education.

Beyond its professionalization in the modern world, literary writing is still linked to an art that many people associate with something on the order of inspiration, creativity and personal expression. According to Steiner, although poetic composition and presentation techniques were taught throughout the ancient world, 'imaginative components, disciplines that express feelings and develop in the literary text, are rarely or late formalised in literary history' (2004, p. 63). Steiner suggests, 'It was necessary the American faith in everyone's right to be gifted, in the inspiration learning, to convert the individual educational acts into institutional ones' (p. 64).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps, as Steiner mentions, teaching creative writing is a contradiction. But learning to write is based not only on previous abilities; the enabling nature of the authorities has much to do with it.

Both a reader and an independent writer are first trained as dependents (CARLINO, 2005), and in this sense, role models are needed. One student said:

I write with a Borges book next to me. I write with such respect. I have all the great

**3-** Steiner (2004) distinguishes as a landmark the beginning in the 1930s of a writers' workshop, with Paul Engle in charge, at Iowa University.

writers of the world; they are watching at me from above. I write and they are up there. That puts me in my place. (Male, 23 years old. Interview 12 April 2009, at a bar near the Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

In the film *The Four Hundred Blows* (TRUFFAUT, 1959), Antoine, the main character, lights a candle and talks to Balzac, asking for inspiration in his literary activity. And he draws on one of the greats, a teacher, an authority, demanding his influence, but Antoine does not feel inhibited by Balzac. This illustrates the idea that the writing task, like any practice, proceeds according to the history of what has already been done. If someone decides to embark upon this practice, that someone must address the tension between the conservation and renovation inherent to the productive act. However, the construction of something new requires both memory and forgetfulness. New production occurs neither under the predecessors' total influence, nor without their presence.

We believe the problem related to tradition, voiced by these students, arises not only in the strength with which it is imposed upon them but also in finding its best expression in the image of the ghost hovering and preventing the subject from flying above. The problem also concerns the opposite, i.e. debilitation of the past in the training idea – the difficulty of working on the *imperfect model* feasible for being creatively appropriated (ALLIAUD, 2009).

The problem regarding the presence of parents is how to relate to them and which dependency or liberation forms are legitimised. Again, it is key to comprehend the interpretation of the authorities' strength.

### Professors as text producers

In certain student accounts, some professors identified as text producers, and the declared recognition dependent on that activity allowed introducing the authorship question as

an authority criterion. Authorship – with the author as heir to complexities of the creative act – brings us closer to authority’s productive edge.

Among students, the professors’ authorial position is linked to experience recognition, reading knowledge and the ability to upgrade their academic careers during class. But authorial position is also an issue to consider in the shoring up of other agents external to the classroom scene. Effectively, national and international awards in academic circles impact student valuations. This brings into play authority linked to what was previously made and to its revival in the present, the externality guaranteeing the subject’s wisdom and possibility of being credited, to be authorised at each meeting. As one student stated:

Professors’ recognition can also be seen in the texts they produce, in the academic production they have through the years and certain readings knowledge implemented also in the classroom. ... It is not only scientific production that they have that is great, and it also has to do with national and international recognition from universities. (Male, 24 years old. Interview 15 September 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

To know that professors publish books is cause for admiration, but the fact that they suggest buying their books usually generates at least emotional rejection because it is interpreted as an act of *selfishness*.

In this sense, students talk about a great individualism within the professorial career, which is translated into legitimate ways of obtaining prestige in the field. ‘In Language Arts there are many stars, an ego exacerbation takes place an interviewee commented (Male, 26 years old. Interview 2 December 2009, at a bar near the Faculty of Humanities and Arts).

Following Becher (2001), we see that in most human sciences, the most compelling image is that of the *lonely professor*. Gradually,

students learn that legitimacy in the field depends largely on the ability to distinguish themselves from others. If we add that, in this area of knowledge, there exist a variety of styles, themes and theoretical guidance, it is not surprising that joint production is the exception, not the rule, and that disagreements are as common as taking a shared position (BECHER, 2001).

On another side, the *author* authority can also be seen working in relation to the texts, especially expressed in the use of quotations. These operate, especially in an examination situation, as a guarantee of the professor or student’s word. One of the interviewees stated it this way:

I remember it was in a test that we had prepared a work, and the professor told us: ‘No, this is wrong’. And we had the chair’s material that was dealt in that way, and she kept on insisting that it wasn’t like that. ... I go to the exams practically with a suitcase with all the books that I have marked, and then I say: a moment, read this, this and this. ... ‘Oh well’, she said. It was the chair’s position, it was her own position. ... So from that moment, we take all the material; otherwise, how do you show her? (Female, 24 years old. Interview 6 November 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

Here, the book represents a third-party authority, another’s mediation that preserves, protects, strengthens and supports the student’s position as speaker. The written word hierarchy prevents conflict and strengthens demonstrability of the subject being evaluated.

Language arts students differentiate the professors who believe that students *must start* reading books along with critiques already written by others and somehow these professors assume the role of tradition guardians. They consider the criticism a support, but encourage students to read

the works, shedding some prejudices. One interviewee commented, 'There is a professor who gives you the theories and then she says, now choose your own adventure' (Male, 25 years old. Interview 19 February 2010 in a bar near the Faculty of Humanities and Arts).

The search in which De Certeau (2006 b) embarked, for balance between two ways of presenting a seminar, allows introducing shades between two opposing ways of approaching books: declared authority and festive communion. The first assumes that the place is constituted by a professorial speech or prestige, i.e. by the strength of the text or the voice of authority. The second is based on a mere exchange of feelings and beliefs in pursuit of a common expressed transparency. According to De Certeau, both ways suppress differences: 'The first, crushing them under a parent's law and the second, deleting them fictitiously in the indefinite lyricism of an almost maternal communion' (DE CERTEAU, 2006 b: 44).

### **The book as a sacred object:** Between the gift and the remnant

Humanities students, generally, and language arts students, specifically, recognise themselves as readers prior to beginning their careers. Individuals can frequently identify some literary work that has impacted them and caused them to be what they are.

With the passing of time, through a bond with new authorities and new institutional regulations on ways of working, the book as object acquires a sacred object's own *aura*. The language used to talk about books is full of emotions and feelings, as exemplified below:

Once I had to take an exam and I read online that there was a book that was great to read, *Madame Bovary*, written by Gustave Flaubert. ... I swear I went to buy that book with such an emotion, ... and do you know what I was I thinking? I thought: "Who is going to read this book, then, with

this excitement? Those who inherit these books of mine – will they feel this emotion I feel when I go to look for it? And see if I find it, and if I cannot find it?" ... This usually happens to all of us. ... (Female, 24 years old. Interview 6 November 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

The sacred character of the book is enhanced when one is in front of an original source, an unpublished copy. And it is in this sense that the more critical students refer to individualism and elitism in literary careers associated with the power – in recognition within the field – that exerts the unique piece's possession. Part of certain people's authority would then lie in the mechanisms deployed to become possessors of objects that bestow distinction in the field, and this does not differ from the identification processes taking place in the institution.

Although many students find the possibility fascinating of accessing almost all literary works from the internet, the book as a material object serves as a distinctive symbol, as a means of access to recognition among peers. An interviewee advised:

You should always have a book in your backpack, and you put a book on the table and you have four classmates like this. ... [She leans heavily on the table and looks down.] And the questions begin: "What do you have? That publisher? I have this one, on Bible paper" [laughs]. And we love it. Each one's library is like a treasure. The library is the training reflection, totally individualistic. And then we talk, for example, about professors who died: 'That person's library was given to such a person, ah! And in fact, why wasn't it given to the Argentinean's or the Arts' library that is the poorest?' (Female, 25 years old. Interview 3 2010, Faculty of Humanities and Arts).

This young woman was clearly presenting one of the deepest problems of some

Argentine public universities—their libraries' weakness. Patriarchal public exhibition is a fact of political and institutional authority, and its protection in personal libraries infringes on the transmission of cultural heritage.

Closely related to archiving policies and materials circulation, one can recognise *generous* professors, who literally *don't have the book hidden under their arms*, as opposed to those who, for example, after boasting about having one of few editions, would refuse to offer it.

There are professors who are generally eminences or supposed eminences, but when you ask them for a book, 'No, I cannot give you the book because it is expensive and is ruined'. This is a literal case of the book under the arm, but there are cases when no, they don't have any problem. It has to do with non-recognition of the speaker. That's awful for me because it does not help you at all, you do not grow, you stay there, and we are destined to reproduce. (Female, 25 years old. Interview 2 November 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

On the other hand, the dynamics occurring around the suggestion of nonexistent books and the perception of protection or donation of the object on a professor's behalf generates a variety of appropriation procedures and identification with those figures. Being invited to the professor's home to look for material is a sign of privilege. The desire *to own all the books, to set up a personal library as such* is expressed, but a critical eye on a supposed encyclopaedic knowledge during training also occurs. The experience around books and reading does not possess the same intensity in all cases.

We find different ways of relating to reading. For some people, this is a practice that cannot be considered in isolation from life itself.

The advantage I have on a normal student at the faculty is that my life is literature. I get up, think and live from a literary view of life and things. I don't take literature as an eight-, six-, four-year study; I'm twenty-four hours, or all those [hours], I'm awake, thinking about that. (Male, 23 years old. Interview 12 April 2009 at a bar close to the Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

For others, however, reading is *something else* in their lives, and in this sense, they interpret as *maltreatment* the professors' authority used in requiring them to read and act as *language arts students*:

You have to read everything. ... Haven't you read this? ... There are some who maltreat you. ... I think that it has to be controlled by the Faculty. And I think that it often produces some parasites, where one is not thinking of a career model, a political model of a professional. You're not thinking about that; you're thinking that you have to read and read and read and be a voracious reader. What for? No, we don't care; we don't ask ourselves 'What for?' No, you have to know a lot—that's why the encyclopaedic profile in many aspects. (Female, 25 years old. Interview 3 May 2010, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

The experience of reading disinterestedly, without set objectives, contradicts both the accreditation requirements and the unanswered questions about the reason to read. In general, militant students formulate this question more often, questioning academicians' modes in relation to knowledge.

Now then, returning to the question of the book, we see that not all have the same value. Not just any book is an authorised object. There are *good* books and *bad* books, books that *should be* read and others that *should not*, prestigious authors and unmentionable authors. Thus, many students hide their previous

readings on the assumption that a language arts student cannot have certain works. 'Don't you dare to say, as a language arts student, I read *Harry Potter*, for example' (Female, 24 years old. Interview 20 October 2009, at a bar near the Faculty of Humanities and Arts).

The reading experience, Larrosa says, (2003) is almost always subject to a kind of pedagogical tutorship, justified by moral criteria, and we might add, by aesthetic or stylistic criteria.

It seems, then, to be that books should be taken under guard and readers undergo rigorous protection. ... Literature experience cannot be a wild, free experience. We must expurgate and organise the library. (LARROSA, 2003, p. 206)

Identity construction is also taking place on the basis of legitimate stories that participate—by belonging to the university institution—in life story construction. And in this life story, they will also be *authorised* and *unauthorised* relationships:

If I'm dating a guy, I like the idea that he reads literature. Apart from that, if you're a language arts student, you won't have a boyfriend who doesn't read! I dated a guy who played rugby and he didn't know anything about literature. He didn't know who Mallarmé was. How can it be that you don't know? Never in your life have you heard about Mallarmé? No. We're in trouble. ... Besides, it happened to me with another guy I dated a short time ago that he wanted all the time to show me that he was at my level because I study language arts. ... What for? To be an intellectual? Then they want to show you that they read, that they are at your level. (Female, 25 years old. Interview 3 May 2010, Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

The figure of the intellectual or the academic takes authority over the professor's.

Yet, teaching is the main job opportunity for these young language arts students coming to graduation. We focus on this point in the following and final section.

#### **A discredited figure: the *high school teacher***

In general, language arts students join the Faculty without thinking of its members as teachers motivated by reading and/or writing interests. Their academic careers and their training level recognition – they highly consider this – mark a clear contrast between the intellectual prestige that Bourdieu considers 'quasi-monopolised by the arts and social sciences faculties professors' (2008: 76) and the loss of prestige associated with teaching in high schools. A young woman said:

It hurts what you have studied; it is like *ending up being* a language teacher. ... All you have read for the soul, to be an intellectual and *end up being* a language teacher. [...] It's like pejorative ... the high school teacher is not valued. When you say that you are studying language arts and people say: 'Ah, language teacher', did you see it as when you are in therapy and something that hurts is thrown to you ... that it's true, that they're right, but it hurts? It's like you chew on those words *end up being*. [...] <sup>4</sup> (Female, 23 years old. Interview 2 October 2009, at a bar near the interviewee's home)

Paying attention not only to content but also to enunciation allows us to observe the resources utilised to create a shared experience from a personal experience. At the same time, the repetitive use of the expression *end up being* is symptomatic of a reality not in the original plan. It is a final option – at the same time, the most feasible and the most disregarded – a valueless option. This viewpoint is also

**4-** To '*chew on those words...*' refers to the idea of trying to assimilate a hurtful fact.

transmitted by some professors. A young woman reproduced the words of an emblematic professor: 'Don't worry that with that face, you will end up being a high school teacher' (Female, 26 years old. Interview 2 June 2009, at the interviewee's home).

The hope of entering the scientific system knowing there are few who succeed—although vacancies for Human Sciences scholarships and researchers have increased in recent years — would generate a competitive and individualistic dynamic about the end of the career. Additionally, students develop closer relationships with professors who guide them in the presentation of research projects.

However, in some cases at the teaching residency stage, a discovery of a job occurs, mainly from some successful experience during practice at secondary or tertiary institutions, but this is not very frequent. In general, such instances are questioned for not having the residency professors' monitoring and guidance — 'you live the residency in loneliness, you are trained alone' — and for feeling 'that they have not been prepared to be teachers' (Female, 23 years old. Interview 2 October 2009, in a bar close to the interviewee's home) and, in some cases, for living through situations of de-authorisation on behalf of the teenagers in front of whom they are performing that role.

The situation that then occurs resembles that recorded in studies about primary teachers' school biographies (see among others ALLIAUD, 2001). The feeling of not being prepared to teach leads to recovery of their own school biographies: There is an absolute lack of connection with high school and with high school content. For instance, 'You do an internship and realise that the approach is different and that you are reviewing things of your own primary and secondary education to be teaching' (Male, 24 years old. Interview 15 September 2009, Faculty of Humanities and Arts).

As regards content, this sense of disconnection comes first; as regards transmission modes, new teachers feel that they

have models to follow, different models that converge in the assembly of a more personal profile. The following excerpt is suggestive:

Well, teaching is roughly imitated. It seems that one copies that model. Somehow, one shifts for oneself and learns quite fast, but certain preparation might not be excessive. I believe that there are teachers who are very lucid and organised, clear when explaining, and then you realise how the order affects the others' understanding of things. Others are somewhat prone to deviate from the topic although they much arouse the students' interest to continue reading. ... And there are people who are very histrionic, and they reach out from another point. Anyway, I think that one takes certain gestures also from people of secondary and primary school and creates a teaching character that really changes, depending on the course, on the stay. Besides, at least in my case, the issue of being a substitute teacher is somehow determining. Because one has limited time and in just half an hour, authority has to be gained and at eighty minutes, the bell will ring. But anyway, it is also interesting. (Female, 26 years old. Interview 2 November 2009, at a bar near the Faculty of Humanities and Arts)

A teaching model is thus assembled and disassembled in every situation, depending on the type of audience one must *attract*. The concept that *authority has to be gained* in each situation is revealed in the vast majority of students' stories. And when, as in this case, they experience it themselves, the idea takes on major relevance.

Regardless of the concept, many novice teachers recognise that when adolescents perceive teachers experiencing passion for their subject matter, it *produces positive effects*. And in the fleeting encounter, something on the order of an experience can take place.

## By way of conclusion

Throughout this work, we analysed different ways of interpreting professors' authority on behalf of language arts students about to complete their studies.

Throughout the work, we noted the delegitimisation of the established links in hierarchical differences. At the same time, we identified different professorial attributes with the power of authority: knowing how to discipline, knowing how to transmit concepts, charisma, recognition in the academic field, positive personality traits and so on. In this sense, allusion was made to the idea of generosity as a feature of those professors who share their knowledge and precious objects (books) without objection, the idea of the *gift* being the focus of their practice. Students especially value the position of those teachers who, updating in their classes an academic trajectory with external recognition, experience and production, consider transmission the act of passing on a cultural legacy and allowing the recipient to do *something else* with what was received.

Through these accounts, we were transported into scenes that show the lights and shadows of a humanistic education model, focusing on the authority of the past, on the sacred feature of the book and on intellectual

figures that create, from contact with the traditions, a precious commodity. The book object is interpreted as a good in itself, as a generator of reading experiences, and at the same time, the main excuse for questioning the meaning of training.

Moreover, the figure of the intellectual becomes important as an image of what most of the students intend to become. The notion of intellectual, in this case, refers more to the humanist model of a personality focused disinterestedly on knowledge, reading, writing – not without limitations and questions – than to the idea of being critical of the settled definition of this figure. Furthermore, the use of intellectual notion is centred more on building an academic or professional identity opposite that of the professorial figure than on defining what the intellectual is or should be.

This paper presented a multiplicity of sometimes opposing visions, but where it is possible to identify a point of convergence, we perceived the students' belief that study with professors who embodied legitimate principles, traits or attributes of authority was central to their future careers. That search for safety in others' strength merits further questioning of authority as a crucial aspect of the student experience, investigating in different institutional spaces the special features of its review, the gaps left by its absence and the kind of presence claimed.

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