

## A COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACH IN PHILOSOPHY?<sup>1</sup>

Michel Tozzi

University of Montpellier 3

[michel.tozzi@orange.fr](mailto:michel.tozzi@orange.fr)

translated from French by Jonas Pfister

### 1. Introduction

The definition of programs “by competencies”, the orientation of working to develop competencies, is, at the global level, a significant current trend in the evolution of education systems, which are progressively institutionalizing this approach – with profound consequences on how curricula are written, on how teachers are assessed, and on how students are made to work.

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, for example, have issued recommendations on the eight key competences for lifelong learning, describing “the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes” associated with each of them.<sup>2</sup> French-speaking Belgium issued a decree on 24.7.1997 on competences, the regulatory framework for the development of all programs. “Competence” is defined as “an ability to implement an organized set of knowledge, know-how, and attitudes enabling the accomplishment of a certain number of tasks.” Quebec and the Canton of Geneva are known for their institutional progress on this issue, which is not self-evident when it comes to practice. For its part, the French common base implies “being able to mobilize one’s skills in complex tasks and situations, at school and then in life” (Decree of 11 July 2006). Schoolchildren now have a skills booklet to be validated at the end of secondary school.

Philosophy as a school discipline is confronted with this evolution: indeed, in the current curriculum of the French general series (Decree of 27 May 2003), there is an explicit reference to skills to be developed: “It is necessary to clearly indicate both the themes to be taught and the skills that students must acquire in order to master and exploit what they have learnt.” “It is in their study that the competences defined in Title III below will be acquired and developed.” It speaks of “learning to think philosophically,” of “aptitude for analysis,” of “the ability of the student to use the concepts elaborated and the reflections developed and to transpose them into a philosophical work that is personal and lives of the knowledge acquired through the study of concepts and philosophical works.” It underlines “the capacities to be mobilized” – a terminology which, together with its underlying theoretical implication, is quite new in the history of philosophy programs.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared under the title “Une approche par compétences en philosophie?” in: *Diotime. Revue internationale de la didactique de la philosophie* 48, 2011.

URL: <http://www.educ-revues.fr/DIOTIME/AffichageDocument.aspx?iddoc=39609>

<sup>2</sup> RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), 30.12.2006, L394/10. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32006H0962&from=FR>



Philosophy is thus challenged, on the one hand, as a school subject – like the others – by the new ambient norms of competence, and on the other hand as a critical reflective approach to societal and school evolutions, in order to reflect on this new paradigm (notably in philosophy of education): is the competency-based approach in philosophy legitimate, or to be proscribed? Can it nourish the didactic reflection of the discipline? Does it have beneficial aspects, both for students and teachers, in a perspective of learning to philosophize? And if it appears desirable, what are the possible abuses, and how can they be avoided?

## **2. The theoretical and practical procedure of the competency-based approach**

### **A) The question of the definition of the concept**

The concept of competence has been introduced into the vocational and educational worlds for many years (in the 1970s in vocational education curricula, in the 1980s for the *seconde*<sup>3</sup>), and integrated into a procedure called “competency-based approach”. This concept is still discussed in research, particularly in the educational sciences: the exact definition of the concept and the procedure of the competency-based approach – a controversial issue in cognitive psychology and in didactics of the notion of transversal competency. It raises questions about the relevance of its institutionalization (writing of programs in which an action verb is placed before content); about its use in the classroom (where it is often confused with a simple objective or procedural knowledge), etc. It is not totally stabilized and must therefore be used with epistemological and methodological caution. Current research in this area in France is based on research in cognitive psychology and non-English-speaking work ergonomics. From a philosophical point of view, the concept has been confronted by some with Aristotle’s *hexis* (a disposition acquired and lasting through renewed praxis, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book II, chap. 4), but the latter gave an ethical dimension to this kind of second nature; by others with Bourdieu’s *habitus*, but the latter, distinct from the habit (*habitude*), is rather unconscious.

Among the definitions circulating, here are a few examples of recognized researchers in the field of education from the French speaking world. A competence is:

- “The ability to associate a precisely identified class of problems with a determined program for treatment” (Meirieu 1989).
- “A capacity for effective action in the face of a family of situations, which one manages to master because one has both the necessary knowledge and the ability to mobilize it in a timely manner to identify and solve real problems” (Perrenoud 1997). He also specifies that “it is a question of facing a complex situation, of constructing an appropriate response without drawing it from a repertoire of pre-programmed responses.”
- “An integrated and functional set of knowledge, know-how (*savoir-faire*), soft skills (*savoir-être*) and know-how-to-become (*savoir-devenir*), which will make it possible,

---

<sup>3</sup> Note of the editors: In France, high school comprises three grades: *seconde*, *première* and *terminale*. The *seconde* is therefore the third year before high school graduation, the *baccalauréat*. Traditionally, philosophy was only taught in the last year, the *terminale*.

when faced with a category of situations, to adapt, solve problems and carry out projects” (Marc Romainville 1998).

- “A complex know-how (*savoir-agir*) based on the effective mobilization and combination of a variety of internal and external resources within a family of situations” (Jacques Tardif, Université de Sherbrooke, conference held on 27 April 2006 at this university).
- “Being competent means being able to mobilize an integrated set of resources to solve problem situations” (Gérard 2008). Or: “Someone is competent when, placed in situations that involve solving a certain type of problem or performing a certain number of complex tasks, he is able to effectively mobilize the relevant resources to solve or perform them, consistent with a certain vision of quality.”

It is a dynamic conception of competence in relation to students’ learning processes, involving the contextualization of processes, the decontextualization necessary for the transfer of acquisitions, and their recontextualization in new situations. A competence thus develops an “intelligence of situations” (Jonnaert). Laurent Talbot specifies, that “the approach by competences is a socio-constructivist approach, which means that the student’s activity is understood as essential for learning. It is the students who build their skills”, in particular by reinvesting knowledge (Talbot 2009: 6).

## **B) Elements of the definition**

We will retain from this approach – this will be the definition that we will test in philosophical learning – that one is competent when “one can mobilize in an integrated way internal and external resources to accomplish in one’s activity a determined type of task in a complex and new situation.” This definition takes up a number of elements that are recurrent among researchers.

For example, in the final year of high school, a student is considered competent in philosophy if he or she knows how to write a *dissertation*<sup>4</sup> properly on the day of the baccalaureate.

Let us clarify several points: “competence” is not innate but is learned through practice, it is the result of a process of acquisition, of learning that takes time.

Competence is not opposed to knowledge, since it implies the mobilization of knowledge. It takes knowledge seriously. Being competent in a philosophical *dissertation*, for example, most often implies knowledge of authors. But knowledge is not enough to define a competence: I can know my multiplication table, or this or that grammatical rule (declarative knowledge), without knowing how to do multiplication properly or use the rule in a sentence (procedural know-how). Reciting an author’s doctrine without putting it into perspective of the question posed is not appropriate in a philosophical *dissertation*. A distinction must therefore be made between a competence (which implies a “living knowledge”) and knowledge that is decontextualized, inert, cut off from tasks and situations.

A competence is accomplished in action, it is know-how (*savoir agir*), and that’s what

---

<sup>4</sup> Note of the editors: The *dissertation* is strictly regulated form of a philosophical essay, a genre specific to the French system. We therefore decided to keep the original name throughout the article.

distinguishes it from knowledge (*savoir* or *connaissance*). It links knowledge to power; it is a tool for emancipation. What counts is the mobilization in action (in situation, in context), of knowledge, of procedures, of processes (writing a *dissertation* in the situation: at home or on the day of the baccalaureate, and in the context of such and such etc.). Competence is a “mobilizing knowledge” (Le Boterf 1994). It is not simply a matter of restoring automated procedures.

But it is necessary to mobilize it “at the right time and for the right purpose.” There is an appropriateness of such and such a resource in relation to such and such a task, this is the know-how of mobilizing knowledge. As a result, the competency-based approach may appear to be more ambitious than the simple transmission of knowledge.

In this mobilization, several resources are summoned, and they are combined, articulated, used in synergy, in proportion to their individual and collective integration. For example, in an acceptable *dissertation*, language, lexical and semantic knowledge is used, and most of the time knowledge of concepts, authors, other disciplinary knowledge, reference to a course, personal experience, a knowledge of conceptualizing and arguing, analyzing an example, a habitus of ordering ideas, etc.

By internal resource, we can understand knowledge, know-how, social skills (in France, we speak rather of knowledge, abilities, attitudes) or experiences. And these resources can be cognitive, social, or physical. External resources for a student can be the teacher, classmates, a lesson, a text, a book, a tool, the Internet, etc. The resources can be human or material.

Nor is a competence an objective, in the sense of the “pedagogy by learning objectives,” because it does not improperly fraction knowledge or know-how, and always calls for a complex task, not a fragmented, sliced task, which makes and gives overall meaning and purpose to school activities. It can thus, through motivation, help to reduce failure at school.

A competence is not visible, unlike a performance. Its theoretical referent is constructivist, not behaviorist. It involves complex mental operations. The competency-based approach aims to replace the paradigm of the pedagogy by learning objectives, which has shown its theoretical limits and practical drifts. In my thesis, I have made fifteen objections to the latter in the application to philosophy (Tozzi 1992). A competence can be developed by itself, but also become a resource for another competence (e.g. “knowing how to read a text” for “reading a philosophical text”).

This approach itself raises criticism. It is part, as Max Weber would say, of the rationalization of human relations, in this case of educational action, seeking the effectiveness of school results, as opposed to disinterested knowledge. It would displace the primacy and quantity of knowledge, the primary role of the transmission of knowledge at school, especially that which is not of immediate social or economic use, and instrumentalize it to develop competences. (Some have even gone so far as to speak of “cultural illiteracy”). This utilitarian conception of knowledge would in fact be linked to the logic of enterprise, imported into the field of education, in connection with the evolution of the labor market (Del Rey 2010). Some, such as Hirtt (2010), add to these arguments that it cannot claim to be part of constructivism and active pedagogies, that it leads to routine bureaucracy in the practice of evaluation, and that it would even reinforce social inequality.

In this article, I will not discuss the competency-based approach in general; nor will I address the difficult issue of “transversal competencies”. The generalist approach of Jean Piaget, based on “stages of development” determined by general competences that are transferable from one domain to another (e.g. hypothetical-deductive reasoning at around 10-12 years of age), finds opposition nowadays in the cognitivist point of view of disciplinary didactics according to which competences acquired in one domain are hardly transferable to another because of their specificity.<sup>5</sup> I will simply try, as a didactician of philosophy, to see if this approach can help student philosopher-apprentices.

### **3. The competency-approach in philosophy classes**

I propose to define the “philosophical competence” of a student (didactic reflection within the framework of the school, and I should also talk about the competence of the philosophy teacher to foster the development of these competences in the students), as a “philosophical know-how”, i.e. “thinking by oneself” (*penser par soi-même*, which does not mean being absolutely original, but taking one’s thoughts into one’s own hands, becoming intellectually autonomous, developing one’s reflexivity on the questions posed to the human condition). And this “by mobilizing internal and external resources in an integrated way on a specific type of complex and new task” – and that is our definition of competence. Let us examine the different elements of this definition in philosophy, to see if it proves to be relevant.

In France, the specific tasks that develop and validate a philosophical competence are institutionally the following: writing a *dissertation*, making an orderly study of a proposed text (where knowledge of its author is not absolutely necessary), and explaining orally an extract from a text supposedly known by the student.

These are complex tasks and activities, as they involve the mobilization of diverse and combined resources. These are carried out in a task that is always similar in its entirety (e.g. writing a *dissertation*), but different each time in terms of the subject addressed (the question asked changes). They are in this sense new each time, even if they belong to the “family of situations” or school genre of the philosophical *dissertation*. The situation in which the task is proposed is itself new: it is not the same thing, in time and place, as writing a *dissertation* “at home”, “on table” and on the day of the baccalaureate.

The internal resources of a student in philosophy can be diverse. They relate to the knowledge (theoretical and experiential), know-how, and attitudes assimilated by the student at school and in his or her life.

#### **A) Knowledge that is diverse in nature and origin**

- Knowledge of philosophical nature: philosophical doctrines (Platonism, Kantianism, etc.), or elements of doctrine (Cartesian doubt, Hegelian dialectic, ...); philosophical positions (idealism and materialism, empiricism and rationalism, stoicism and epicureanism...); content of a work (Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party*), or of an extract (Descartes’ piece of wax, Augustine’s perplexity about the definition of time,

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example Bernard Rey’s critique in *Diotime* 3 2002.

...); classical problems (the theory of knowledge, the question of the existence of God...); contents on certain notions (truth, freedom...); “reference points” (*repères*), in the sense of current curricula of the *terminale* (conceptual distinctions: absolute and relative, abstract and concrete...), etc.

- The philosophy teacher’s courses.
- General and cultural knowledge, acquired outside school (concerts, museums, reading, team sports, television, internet...), or on the occasion of other school disciplines: history of ideas, literature (Cicero or Lucretius in Latin, the Enlightenment in French, the theatre of Sartre or Camus, Shakespeare in English or Cervantes in Spanish), arts and history of arts, Greece in Greek or history classes, proofs in mathematics, the physics of Newton or Einstein, the theory of liberalism in economy, institutions, republican values, legislation in civic education, etc. In this sense culture is considered to be a basis and a support for reflection.
- The student’s personal experience, the more or less analyzed experience of love, friendship, belief, beauty, body etc.

## **B) Skills, abilities**

In order to write a *dissertation*, it is necessary to master, i.e. to know how to apply in a contextualized situation a certain number of lexical and semantic codes (linguistic capacity in spelling and syntax), and more broadly a communicative capacity (not to write for oneself only, but to aim at an addressee in order to be understood, and more precisely at an assessor with his or her criteria).

It is also necessary to implement procedures specific to the typically French “school genre” of the *dissertation*: make an outline, with an introduction that leads to the subject, an orderly development with two or three parts, a conclusion (see the works of A. Chervel at the NPRI).

In addition to these formal aspects, there are specific disciplinary requirements, developed and prescribed in the method manuals: the introduction must problematize the question (behind the question, where is the problem and what is at stake, the difficulties in solving it, etc.), the parts must, for example, support different points of view, the conclusion must recapitulate and then open to extend the questioning; there are different types of possible plans, depending on the formulation of the subject, listed in ad hoc works, etc. For our part (Tozzi 1992), what seems to us to be philosophically decisive is, rather than formal criteria or procedures, the implementation of certain thought processes that give an appearance, a philosophical aim to the “duty” (*devoir*, the choice of this term would require further development).

Three processes are particularly structuring the thinking that is meant to be philosophical (Tozzi 2005).

First, there is the *problematization*. In particular this contains the ability to question the meaning of something (“Is life worth living?”) or the truth of a statement (“Are things the way they appear to us?”). Also this process involves the ability to doubt or to question one’s opinions (“I believe in ghosts, but am I right?”), which are often prejudices (statements made before they have even been thought through), and to consider them as hypotheses rather than theses. This also involves the ability to go back from an affirmation to the question it implicitly answers, or

to flush out the presuppositions of a thesis and verify their relevance (“To maintain that “God is good” implies that he exists, is it true?”) and to question the representations of a notion (“If I say: ‘Freedom consists in doing what we want’, what are the consequences?”) Finally, the process also should involve the ability to make explicit if and in what way a question (“What is the sex of angels?”) or a notion (“Is the unconscious a scientific hypothesis?”) poses a philosophical problem.

The *conceptualization* is the second process; in particular it involves the ability to define a notion in comprehension (“The human being is a reasonable animal”), to start from its representation (“Truth is what is”) and to elaborate the concept, notably with the help of conceptual distinctions (here truth and reality).

The third important process I shall call *argumentation*, or the ability to support and validate a thesis or an objection by duly founded reasons and rational arguments (“God exists because a finite being cannot have engendered the idea of an infinite being”, or “It is because it is imperfect that the human being imagines a perfect being”).

These three “basic philosophical capacities” are useful in complex philosophical tasks, such as writing a *dissertation*, because it is their application to a given issue that attests to the actual presence of the student’s personal reflection.

### **C) Attitudes, or ways of being**

Philosophical attitudes can be intellectual or practical. For Socrates, the existential philosophical attitude par excellence is courage in the face of death; for a Stoic, the ability to change any disturbing representation of things; for an Epicurean, the concern to enjoy only natural desires; for Spinoza the joyful increase of our power to be; for Kant the ethical action of duty alone; for Marx the collective transformation of the world, etc.

These are practical philosophical postures in life, which require training (P. Hadot spoke of “spiritual exercises”). With regard to “thinking by oneself”, on which I have didactically centered my conception of philosophical competences in school, the postures are rather intellectual, quite difficult to distinguish from the processes mentioned above: one could perhaps speak of autonomy of judgement, critical mind, initiative and creativity of reflection, of putting oneself (in the perspective of an ethics of thought) authentically in front of a question (getting intellectually and personally involved in it, not only because it is a graded school task).

Among the external resources that can be mobilized to do a *dissertation* “at home”, one can list (without value judgment): people, especially the teacher, at school or in a private lesson, of whom one can ask for advice; one’s classmates, family, friends with whom one can informally discuss the subject. Furthermore knowledge, which can be found in the courses and textbooks of other disciplines, or through a documentary research on the internet concerning a concept, an author, a problem.

Finally, tools, such as the teacher’s course in which one can immerse oneself, the philosophy textbook on the notion of the program, or a collection of texts; a work on the methodology of the *dissertation*, or on corrected answers; a digest such as “SOS bac”, etc. For assignments or exams, one will obviously have to rely mainly on one’s internal resources.

#### **D) Resource mobilization**

In order to accomplish this complex and ever-changing task of the *dissertation*, it will be necessary to “mobilize these (one’s) resources”. What is resource mobilization?

For example, it will be necessary to think in a *dissertation* about the need for a social contract: “Is a contract necessary for people to live together?” To “use” the knowledge available in one’s memory (contractualism in political philosophy, the theories of Grotius, Hobbes, Rousseau or Rawls for example, with such and such a work or extract), philosophical or other (historical and legal examples of constitutions and laws, economic examples of the employment contract or the commercial contract); summoning known “legal or regulatory” breaches of contract (penal code, more generally transgression of laws and rules with a scale of penalties provided for; possible mediation techniques in the event of conflicts) etc.

It will also be necessary to think of exemplifying the question of the contract from one’s knowledge but also from one’s experiences, for example the internal rules or “class life” of one’s school, the contract signed during a “small job”, etc.

Furthermore, it will be necessary to think about implementing thought processes, intellectual know-how of problematization (how is this question important for the human condition, what are the issues at stake, why is this question problematic, how to formulate this problem, why is it difficult to think about it theoretically and to solve it practically); of conceptualization (What is a contract? The “social contract”? What does it mean to live together? Let us distinguish between man in his state of nature and in his state of culture, before and after a contract); of argumentation (a contract is necessary to protect the weakest from the freedom of the strongest; the contract is useless and even harmful because it prevents by its constraints the free development of the economy).

These thought processes do not only exist in philosophy (one uses problematization and conceptualization in the sciences, one argues in French...), but they have a specifically philosophical use: a scientific problem is distinct from a philosophical problem in its field of reference and formulation; science cannot solve certain philosophical problems (for example in ethics or politics), and vice versa; it has its specific means of proof (demonstration, experimentation), whereas philosophy can only express itself in natural language; philosophical rational argumentation, unlike in French, is addressed in its rationalist tradition exclusively to the rational community of minds, i.e. to the universal audience, etc.

Furthermore, the question posed must be taken seriously, because it concerns me personally for such and such a reason (e.g. my employer did not pay me what I was owed in full and did not respect the contract); it is at the heart of current political and economic events (threats to the intergenerational contract of pensions by distribution would lead to an injustice that would harm the least favored); and more generally it involves the human condition. Finally, it should be noted that the situation in which the task lies is complex and new.

But what is the cognitive operation of “resource mobilization”? Making an inventory of the resources available on a subject by scanning its memory is certainly useful (how many candidates at the end of the test say: “Damn, I didn’t think at all about the Rousseau text we studied, right in the middle of the subject!”); but to evoke them mentally is not enough for them to be really mobilized; one can summon Rousseau’s theory and not put it in perspective of the



subject; reciting the social contract according to Rousseau proves that one has knowledge, but reproducing it by heart without integrating this knowledge into the question asked could just as well serve the candidate (one can even prefer a real reflection without reference to authors to a pile of doctrines where one has lost the meaning of the question by filling pages; the ideal being obviously to master a good use of knowledge that one has understood rather than simply learned). In the same way, as much as the recourse to personal experience is relevant as a support for an analysis or as an example of a thesis, it becomes anecdotal in its contingency if it is enclosed in a narrative that does not give meaning to the subject treated.

It is not easy to define what constitutes an adequate mobilization of resources, i.e., what is best suited to the specific task proposed. What is needed is a cognitive theory of mobilization and more specifically a formalization of the philosophical mobilization of resources. P. Perrenoud gives a lead by evoking the Piagetian notions of schema (simple schema and complex schema), taken up by the neo-Piagetian psychologist G. Vergnaud.

This understanding of mobilization processes could help students in their activity in front of the task, a real activity which remains a black box of which we only see the result, the verbo-conceptual product (more or less success or failure), and not the cognitive process (how did it happen in the student's head?). It is a didactic work, little explored so far, to be carried out, as it could facilitate such mobilization.

All the more so as the necessary resources are multiple and combined. For example, to deal with the subject of the contract, one may need both spelling and grammar knowledge to write properly, knowledge about Hobbes, his experience with contracts, thought processes, a way of putting oneself in front of the question, etc. Mobilization is not only the use of resources but the ability to connect them.

For instance, I have shown in my thesis 1992 and defended ever since that thought processes are closely interdependent and articulate each other. One cannot mobilize oneself without the other: conceptualizing is defining and by the same token trying to answer a question about a notion ("What is love? Love is ..."), arguing is often justifying an answer (a thesis) to a question (Question: "Should the death penalty be reinstated?"; thesis: "No"; argument: "You can't blame someone for taking someone's life and then take away their own"); or rationally justifying a definition: "One can say that man is a 'rational animal' (it is both a definition and a thesis, a definition defends a thesis on a notion), because unlike other animals, man is the only one who has a reason". Questioning, defining and arguing are indeed distinct mental operations but they are closely intertwined.

How to articulate these capacities, knowledge or experiences., on a precise subject and between them, is one of the central questions of the didactics of learning to philosophize. The resources must be both integrated by the apprentice-philosopher and integrated with each other, i.e. contribute to a philosophically acceptable *dissertation*. Let us recall that knowledge is assimilated as knowledge by a subject when it is understood (not only learned) and memorized, but it is only integrated in the perspective of a competence when it allows the adequate realization of a complex task, in a new situation (otherwise it is only content in a box of memory).

So far, we have reasoned within the framework of the French institutional teaching of

philosophy in the last year of high school, with its programs and exams. A competency-based approach would imply in this perspective the following:

- the appropriation by the student of philosophical contents (notably notions, problematics, texts, doctrines, reference points), which is what the philosophy teacher traditionally – and often mainly, sometimes exclusively – tries to do;
- the development of capacities of problematization, conceptualization, argumentation, notably through specific exercises of a complex nature, since these are thought processes required in tasks with a philosophical aim;
- training to articulate these processes, through ad hoc situations, and ultimately *dissertations*, since training in a single process is not necessarily sufficient to know how to articulate it to others;
- the ability to mobilize one's resources: one's knowledge (philosophical or not), thought processes, personal experience, in the perspective of complex tasks on various subjects.

The last three points, which presuppose real intellectual activity, imply that something else should be done in class than just lectures, the study of texts (which often remains purely declarative knowledge for the student), or the correction of *dissertations* (prescriptive advice is rarely effective for the real activity of a student who faces an obstacle).

In short, we are less in a dominant logic of transmission of contents (though necessary). Furthermore, we follow a logic of learning, where a content only takes its full meaning if it can be mobilized in and through an activity; and where it is necessary to implement, in order to accomplish a philosophical task (e.g. a *dissertation*), know-how in terms of thought processes, philosophical and communicational attitudes or postures.

This implies a significant evolution in the teacher's practice of philosophy teaching, which is hardly based so far, despite allusions in the curricula, on a competency-based approach, in its hierarchical prescriptions, its initial and continuing training, more generally its professional culture. It is even one that is fiercely opposed (notably by its anti-pedagogy). It is this necessary pedagogical and didactic *aggiornamento* that has been the guiding thread of my research since 1988.

#### **4. The competency-based approach in a didactic approach to learning to philosophize**

##### **A) Framing of the concept**

Initially, the aim in my early research (1988-1998) was to propose a theoretical framework and practical approaches in the final year of high school, with a view to a “didactic approach to learning to philosophize”. The use of the term “didactics” referred to the gradual development of disciplinary didactics by educational researchers since the 1970s, with the establishment of

the IREM<sup>6</sup> in mathematics: The aim was to transpose the content and methodologies specific to the discipline didactically so that they could be assimilated by schoolchildren, within their reach according to their age and level, while integrating for their learning a certain number of scientific contributions on the intellectual and emotional development of children, learning processes, in particular cognitive, developmental and differential psychologies, research on evaluation, but also neurosciences (in particular neurophysiology of the brain), sociology of curricula, etc.

I then spoke of the “learning” (*apprentissage*) of philosophizing, in order to finalize the didactic intention on the student’s learning, the teacher’s job being to organize this learning of the “apprentice philosopher”. Finally, I referred to “philosophizing” (what the curricula call “philosophical reflection”), to emphasize the type of student activity aimed at: learning to think as much as possible by oneself, distancing oneself from one’s preconceived ideas through the critical exercise of informed rational judgment.

As early as 1992, based on a two-year seminar with French philosophy teacher-correctors (1988-1989), I sketched out a definition of didactic philosophizing (and not strictly philosophical, since the philosophical consensus on what philosophy is and what to philosophize is largely unfindable), which seemed to me to be operational for the class of the French *terminale*: “To philosophize is an attempt to articulate – on questions concerning the human condition (our relationship to the world, to others, to ourselves), in an authentic search for meaning and truth – processes of problematization of questions, conceptualization of notions and argumentation of theses and objections.” These three thought processes appear to me as basic philosophical abilities that combine on complex tasks to build competences in reading, writing and philosophical discussion.

In the years that followed, I encountered a number of very different ways of teaching philosophy in foreign countries. I then proposed, based on empirical findings, four and then five different, even opposite paradigms of didactization: doctrinal (e.g. Thomism under Franco, or Marxism under Stalin), historical (Italy), praxeological (Belgian secular moral education), problematizing (Lipman), problematico-patrimonial (France). Since 2000, I have also carried out a number of studies on learning to philosophize with children and teenagers<sup>7</sup> and in the city (e.g., *café philo*, *banquets philo*, *ateliers philo*, philosophical consultation or *rando philo*).

I then gradually became aware of the fact that my definition prioritized a paradigm that is intellectual (learning to think more than to live well, or even to die), based on problems (on questioning and conceptualizing, but rather little on philosophical heritage), and rationalistic (where rationality is little enriched by the affects or the faculty of imagination, where the argumentative prevails for example over hermeneutics). But any didactic paradigm is historically and geographically situated, bearing the context of a given educational system, even when it is criticized, and of the theoretical referents called upon.

---

<sup>6</sup> Note of the editors: “IREM” is referring to the Institutes for research on the teaching of mathematics (*Instituts de recherche sur l’enseignement des mathématiques*). We will continue to explain the abbreviations used by Tozzi in the footnotes.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.philotozzi.com](http://www.philotozzi.com) or articles in the journal *Diotime*.

My broadened experience<sup>8</sup> has thus led me to relativize and enrich my didactic vision, by taking more account of certain aspects (Tozzi 2008). For example, learning to think has its full philosophical meaning only if it also involves the learning of how to live better – individually and collectively, Also, problematization and conceptualization deepen as they are enriched by the thinking of philosophers; and the voices for philosophizing and learning to philosophize, as well as teaching philosophy, are multiple. Finally, it seems necessary that children should be able to connect their reflective thinking with their sensitivity and imagination.

So how do I conceive today of a competency-based approach to learning to philosophize?

The competency-based approach must be distinguished from the simple transmission of philosophical knowledge (doctrinal or historical paradigm), because philosophical knowledge only makes sense for a subject who wants to philosophize for himself in a personal philosophical activity (problematizing paradigm). Knowing Kant's thought does have a patrimonial objective (to identify historically a great moment in Western thought, or to know how such and such a philosopher asks a philosophical question and answers it), but for a person who wants to philosophize, this encounter is always with and against this thought. Now I would say: We work on Kant's thought so that it works on us, it provokes us, and it affects us intellectually. And if we call ourselves "Kantian", for example, it is because we have had a personal positioning in relation to one or more questions that we have personally been confronted to, with the vision that Kant proposed to us and which seduced us, and also in relation to those of other philosophers who had other perspectives, which was less appealing to us less. Otherwise, more than a philosopher, even a modest one, one becomes a philosophical historian, or a commentator on an author: This is respectable and useful in the philosophical field, but it needs to be put into the perspective of learning to philosophize; which in the end is effort to think for oneself.

Therefore, the competency-based approach must be distinguished from general pedagogy by learning objectives. The latter is based on the behaviorist presuppositions of an observable behavior, which is not very operational for high-level thought processes (which are better taken into account by a cognitivist approach); it overly fractures the capacities to be developed, losing the overall sense of activity for the learner; it neglects the situational aspect and the complexity of the tasks to be carried out; it develops a restrictive conception and a too frequent practice of evaluation (obsession with evaluation), both sequential and summative.

The competency-based approach (this is a common point with the pedagogy by learning objectives) has the advantage of placing itself in the perspective of the student's learning. It also clarifies in the eyes of the teacher and the student what the student will have to acquire and mobilize in situations where he or she is led to philosophize. The approach and these activities are not opposed to the acquisition of knowledge, as it is sometimes criticized, and appears to us to be highly integrative because of the multiplicity of resources to be mobilized and combined.

However, we must be vigilant about three possible excesses, which can be mutually reinforcing. The first is that this approach is too often confined to what it prescribes (as is the case with reference frameworks in prescriptive curriculum didactics), instead of being rooted

---

<sup>8</sup> I am very much imbued on the one hand by the Western rationalistic tradition, and on the other hand by the educational sciences, in which I taught at university for twelve years, and more broadly the human sciences.

in the reality of the student's activity (which is taken into account in descriptive didactics, as close as possible to the work of the apprentice philosopher). On the one hand, a task (in this case a school task) is, according to the ergonomics of work, prescribed (by a program, an instruction from the teacher, or even self-prescribed by the student: what I believe I "must do" to accomplish the task). On the other hand, the student's (and the teacher's) activity in class is real; what Dominique Bucheton's research team at LIRDEF<sup>9</sup> in Montpellier calls "study gestures" (2009). Research shows that there is always a gap between the prescribed and the real, because the task resists the student's activity with difficulties that he or she tries more or less successfully to overcome. Competence is developed in and through an activity, not through a formally defined task. It is on this real activity that one must work in didactics.

Second, the competency-based approach may simply be a pedagogy by learning objectives in a new outfit. In this case, it hides under the word "competence" the notion of learning objective and the pedagogy by learning objectives.

Finally, the approach may be based on a concern with evaluation, which is overly prescriptive (due for many to the academic requirements of grading) and insufficiently formative. The first priority perspective of a learning process must be this: learning time must be much longer than assessment time, and assessment must be primarily formative, and not summative.

This approach is to be built in philosophy. On the one hand, because the magisterial norms in force in the dominant practice are not very permeable to active methods and a socio-constructivist approach to learning. On the other hand, because of the real difficulties to understanding in theory and to implementing in practice this type of approach, in rupture with the professional habits, in particular because it modifies the role of the teacher, being essentially one accompanying and not exclusively of transmitting.

It is the task of a didactics of learning to philosophize to clarify theoretically this approach in philosophy, to analyze the practices of accompaniment of the students who go in this direction in order to capitalize the relevant attempts, and to propose tracks of practices: methods, exercises, situations, tools etc.

## **B) Some perspectives**

### **1. Being clear about the thinking processes to be developed<sup>10</sup>**

#### *Types of processes*

I have put forward as fundamental (i.e. necessary to meet the requirements of a standard test in philosophy, the *dissertation*, considered in the program of 2000 by Renaut as "unavoidable heritage of philosophical teaching"), three philosophical processes (to problematize, to conceptualize, and to use arguments). I insisted on their specificity in philosophy, since they also exist in other disciplines (sciences, French...). They were induced empirically in a historic period (in the 1990s) from the evaluation criteria of about twenty French evaluators of the *dissertation* at the baccalaureate exam. These processes, sometimes specified (e.g., for

---

<sup>9</sup> Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire de Recherche en Didactique, Éducation et Formation

<sup>10</sup> See Tozzi 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004, 2007.

argumentation: “to lead a reasoning, to appreciate the value of an argument”), are found in the current philosophy program in the final year of high school.

Further “competencies” are stated in the programs: to “analyze, ... analyze an example”. These competencies should be further specified. What is a “philosophical analysis”? Is it a method? A general method, or a specific method of such and such a philosopher (one thinks for example of Cartesian analysis?) The student must be able to get a precise idea of it since this is what she or he has to implement. What is “analyzing an example”? Is it the application of this method of analysis to an example? How should this be done? The skill is named here, but it is hardly described. Some also speak of “deepening” (*approfondir*). However, this is a vague word. What does it mean in philosophy? A work of cognitive description must be done – this is a philosophical requirement – in order to “know what we are talking about” and “to proof if what we say about it is true”.

It is a problem of knowing whether thought processes are competences, or only capacities, as I suggested to define them in our model for learning to philosophize in 1992. Especially since, in the competency approach, a competency can be mobilized as a resource to develop another competency (e.g., conceptualization for *dissertation*). The transition from a skill to a competence certainly depends on the complexity of the thought process on the one hand, and on the need to mobilize resources for a new task on the other. One can say for example that in a *dissertation* in undergraduate studies (*licence*) in philosophy on the question “Are we responsible for our unconscious?” the understanding and treatment of the subject implies a conceptualization by the candidate as a true competence, if it is based on Lacan’s distinction of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. One can say this, because it is first necessary to master the understanding of what Lacan elaborated (to have a true knowledge of it, and not the memorization of a summary). Second, it is necessary to mobilize this knowledge, and not to be satisfied with simply putting what one believes to know about Lacan in the perspective of a subject who problematizes human responsibility vis-à-vis the unconscious (questioning how one can be responsible for what one does not know, if responsibility implies the consciousness of one’s acts).

#### *Levels or degrees of demand on thought processes*

I propose to refine, within the framework of a progressive approach to learning of how to philosophize, the degrees of requirement for a given process. Following the competency-based approach we understand by degree of requirement a deepening of the mastery of a thought process. This deepening is more of a spiral conception of learning than a step-by-step conception in successive stages, of which the previous one is a prerequisite for the next one: it is a question of reworking these processes over time, going further, higher or deeper according to the direction of the spiral in its realization.

#### *Problematizing*

For example, we can’t philosophize, as Plato or Aristotle say, without being surprised, i.e. asking ourselves questions. There is an example from a schoolboy from CM1<sup>11</sup>: “Does friendship last forever?” It was a real question for this child, to which he had no answer, because it exceeded his personal experience and his knowledge of human feelings, and involved a future

---

<sup>11</sup> Note of the editors: In the French primary school system there are four grade levels: CE1, CE2, CM1 and CM2.

that was, after all, unpredictable. Real, assumed, and expressed astonishment, where one is genuinely confronted with a problematic question, is for a child a first level of questioning, which attests to the awakening of a reflective thought.

But it will not generally be considered by high school philosophy teachers as a process of problematization, which represents a second level. A question, they will say, is not a problem. A problem is elaborated when we understand the “urgency”, the philosophical stakes of the question, for example ethical or epistemological, and especially when we become aware of the difficulty to ask and solve it, often because of revealed contradictions (e.g., “Who am I?” – my identity seems problematic because my psychic and moral consciousness doubles me, my unconscious is repressed and I change in time, etc. Or, another example, “What is our relationship to others?”: the relationship to others is problematic because the other is at the same time similar to and different from me, the other is close and distant, brother and stranger).

Finally, the third level of questioning is the problematization of a question with the help of philosophical knowledge (the enlightenment of the question posed will for example be deepened with the Sartrean conception of the other as hell, of pity with Rousseau or of sympathy with Max Scheler).

#### *Conceptualizing*

In the same way, a child who defines a word referring to a individual object (like: a table is a board with legs) engages in a process of conceptualization in the sense that language implies generalization (e.g., this definition is suitable for all wooden tables). The definition of an abstract word (like: what is identity?) is more difficult for the student, because the individual escapes its definition, unless one evokes situations from a student’s experience (this is what one puts on both sides of the =). It seems easier for them to define a concept via extension, i.e. by pointing out an illustrative example (“A friend? Laurent is my friend.”) than to define it by its general attributes (“A friend is someone to whom one confides one’s secrets because one trusts him or her.”).

There are degrees in the conceptualization process, whose demands on the teacher may vary with age of the students: The student’s attempt of conceptualization should cover the entire scope of the concept, not just a part of it (define the table, i.e. all past, present, future, imaginary tables, not just those made of wood). He or she should not just define negatively, since knowing what it is not does not say what it is. We should tell the student to be vigilant about falsely generalizing inductions (“All swans are black.”), but also that naming a single attribute (“A friend is someone you have fun with.”) is not enough (“We have fun with a buddy too.”). Instead, it is necessary to find specific, discriminating characteristics, obtained by conceptual distinctions (the difference between a friend and a buddy is this: a friend is a chosen person whom you like for a long time and to whom you can tell everything). We go up a step further when we use the conceptual distinctions of certain authors to approach a problem. For example, if we are dealing with the question “What can I know?”, we start to support our reflection by using the distinctions between meaning, imagination and understanding in Descartes, or understanding, pure reason and practical reason in Kant.

#### *Argumentation*

For an elementary schoolchild it is easier to argue by using an example (On duties towards

pets: “I’ve never seen someone eat a dog, it’s forbidden”), than to look for a counter-example (“We eat dogs in China, we hunt them in Mexico”), and it will be an extra difficulty to construct a more abstract argument (“We don’t eat them because we love them”). In secondary school it is possible to ask the students to do more or less complex syllogistic reasoning, to hunt for sophisms or to make use of formal propositional logic. We’d thus need to refine levels of requirements for the different expected thought processes.

## **2. Clearly define the types of complex tasks proposed that develop specific skills**

The institutional tasks proposed to students in the final year of secondary school are written *dissertations* and explanations of texts from philosophical works. Three types of tasks seem to us to be absent or minorized, even though they are philosophically formative.

First, discussion with a philosophical aim (*discussion à visée philosophique*), which is rather rare in philosophy classes (Tozzi 1999), even when there are moments of “dialogical lecture” (*cours dialogué*) which is its weak version. This is due to the low opinion of the role of the student’s oral language in learning to philosophize (that of the teacher, on the other hand, is overestimated by the importance of the lecture), and to the predominance of the student’s or philosophers’ written work, especially in university teaching and recruitment competitions. The professorial *doxa* grants to the oral “the unbearable lightness of opinion”, hence its condemnation in principle of the *café philo* in the city: the discussion would be by nature doxological, a conversation without rigor, the reign of the *doxa*. There is, however, a whole philosophical tradition of oral interaction in Antiquity (e.g. Socratic dialogue) and in the Middle Ages (e.g. *disputatio*).

It is true that the implementation of a discussion in class is pedagogically difficult. It implies mastering the management of the dynamics of a large group involved in exchanging thoughts, an organization based on rules concerning the way in which the turns of speech are conducted, the risk by giving the floor to students of not being able to control the turn of the debate and its progress as one would like to have it, vigilance with regard to intellectual requirements to be remembered and to be able to maintain etc. But it is perfectly possible and very formative for experienced students. However, those who try it often become discouraged because of the lack of adequate training.

It is the experiments with philosophical teaching in the vocational baccalaureate that have shown the interest of students in this “new school genre” (the expression is from G. Auguet in his thesis from 2003). And above all the last decade of practices with a philosophical aim in France in primary and secondary schools, where in fact this type of practice predominates, more accessible to children with school difficulties in writing. University research – notably theses – carried out on these practices based on the analysis of corpus of verbatims has shown to what extent it can be formative as soon as the animation is intellectually demanding. They develop on the one hand communicative competences – cognitive, social and ethical –, learning to listen and understand, to intervene wisely in a group on a specific problem, to formulate publicly a relevant and coherent thought. But they also develop philosophical competences on the other hand, the ability to question or how to define notions in extension and comprehension, to distinguish concepts, to find an example, to produce a counter-example, to validate rationally



one's point or to make an objection with good reasons.

The second blind spot is the focus in writing on the *dissertation*, whereas there is a possible diversification of philosophical writing. The *dissertation* is a “school genre” invented in the French educational system at the end of the 19th century (cf. the work of A. Chervel at the INRP<sup>12</sup>) and used in philosophy and in other disciplines (french, history, economics). It is a genre not much appreciated by the philosophers themselves, except when, like Kant and Rousseau, they take competitions, as opposed to dialogue, interview, letter, aphorism, meditation, essay, diary etc., all this variety of writings that Frédéric Cossutta analyzed as “philosophical genres”. These “philosophical genres” are as many forms of writing chosen by philosophers to express their thoughts, philosophically invested, and which can be as formative as the “school genre *dissertation*”. They are complex activities, developing specific skills, for example, writing a philosophical dialogue on a given question or problem (Tozzi 2000).

Third point: the official and exclusive focus on texts by philosophers (Tozzi et al. 1994, Tozzi/Molière 1998), exclusively Western, dead, and male with one exception – Hannah Arendt. As if there were, in a logic of self-referentiality, only philosophical supports that could make one think. While there are also myths – Greek or otherwise (Tozzi 2006) – or literature, more generally art (Tozzi et al. 2008; Chirouter 2008), which can trigger philosophical reflection, because they speak to us with sensitivity and imagination of the anthropological depth of our human condition. Here too, it is the practice of philosophy with children that has highlighted the interest of myth and of a consistent and resistant children's literature as a metaphorical support for a problematizing and conceptual revival of narrativity with students. Not that there aren't many such attempts in the *terminale*, but there is no mention of it in the program.

Discussion with a philosophical aim, diversified forms of philosophical writing, diversified mythical, literary or artistic supports to activate thought – there are three types of tasks that are not valued or undervalued in official French philosophical teaching (UNESCO 2007), which have shown their formative value by widening the philosophical public to children, adolescents, students in vocational education and in the city. And which could also enrich philosophy in the *terminale*. There could be complex tasks for students that could both develop the reflexive thought processes we have been talking about, but also bring up new processes (e.g. the use of metaphor in aphorism) and new specific skills (e.g. writing a philosophical letter).

### **3. Clarify resource mobilization processes to involve students in them**

The process of mobilization of resources is certainly a blind spot in the student's philosophical work for teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers, which must give rise to studies and experimentations. But this is where the “operational character of knowledge” is tested in the student's activity (Ane Jorro).

Certain obstacles can obviously be identified empirically: mobilizing knowledge on a task is not simply a matter of restoring memorized knowledge, but of putting it into perspective on the subject. But what is it exactly that needs to be “put into perspective” – is it a doctrine, a studied text, a problem? It is necessary to make this more precise. It would certainly be easier

---

<sup>12</sup> Institut national de recherche pédagogique

for a student to mobilize his knowledge if, as ACIREPH<sup>13</sup> claims, the philosophy programs were more determined, that is to say more refocused on certain problems, which would guide the questions of the subjects under examination.

Similarly, mobilizing one's personal experience is not the same as telling a fragment of one's life. It is to summon up a life experience as a support for an analysis enlightening the subject or to exemplify it. But what is a philosophical analysis of an experience? We know that it possesses the evidence of a reality that imposes itself and resists, and which seems to have a strong influence: it is true because I live it. But it is confusing reality and truth: an experience can be listened to, it can hardly be discussed; it can be deceptive (think of the illusions of the senses, or the ephemeral love at first sight). All individual experience is contingent, experiences are relative, diverse or sometimes contradictory. What can we conclude from an individual experience? And yet the analysis of reality, of which personal experience is one of the registers, whether in its sensory, affective, imaginary, or cognitive dimensions, teaches us about the human condition: under what condition can a student's appeal to personal experience be philosophically exploited? There are both philosophical and didactic debates here.

On external resources, a student may very well "copy and paste" from sources on the internet, or have the *dissertation* done by someone at home in a private class or with his family. He or she may get a satisfactory grade but will not have made progress in learning to philosophize or in intellectual autonomy, which may be problematic during the exam. On the other hand, another student might have understood that talking with peers or an adult to understand their approach, take their theses or objections seriously and take a personal position on their points of view by rationally justifying one's own, is an excellent training for thinking.

From a theoretical point of view, we hardly have a "model" of this mobilization at all. Montaigne spoke, as opposed to memorization, of appropriation which "encumbers my judgment", of "digestion", but this is only a metaphor. We must begin by asking the right questions: how does a student – which is quite naturally what a "good student" in philosophy does – mobilize his internal and external resources in philosophy? What would enlighten us would be explanatory interviews with this type of student, which would help him to verbalize as closely as possible his intellectual functioning when confronted with a given task that he succeeds in, so as to empirically identify a model that could be formalized. While being aware, moreover, that intellectual functioning can be very different from one individual to another, which raises the question of "mobilization profiles".

The questions could focus on different points:

- "How do you go about it?"
- "What is going on in your head when you are confronted with the subject?"
- "How do you mobilize your philosophical knowledge to construct and write your *dissertation*?"
- "How do you mobilize your personal experience for such a task?"
- "How do you use the teacher's course, a textbook, the internet, contacts with peers

---

<sup>13</sup> Association pour la Création d'Instituts de Recherche sur l'Enseignement de la Philosophie

or adults etc. to help you in your task?”

An example: The interest of Pierre Vermersch’s method is to put the students in contact with the reality of their activity, by focusing the interview on what they are doing, independently of their intentions or the advice received, which gives us precious information on their actual work, in the ergonomic sense of the term (real, not prescribed). To our knowledge, there is hardly any research on the subject (except at the CNAM<sup>14</sup>, in Yves Clot’s team).

Some practitioners – few in number – are groping around in their classrooms to facilitate this mobilization, especially if they have a practice of accompanying the work of students in a formative evaluation process.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, it is not easy refrain from giving prescriptive advice (“conceptualize more!” says the teacher; “yes, but still...” wonders the student, helpless when he faces this order). The latter often draws inspiration from methodological works or takes up the approach that has been most successful for the teacher in the tasks requested, the same as that of the student. The teachers themselves would still need to know clearly how they go about mobilizing their resources, which often remains largely implicit.

#### **4. Training teachers in the competency-based approach**

In the *terminale*, giving a lesson or explaining a philosophical text to students does not prepare students for competences because a logic of transmission predominates. The student may acquire knowledge, which is important for a philosophical culture, but he or she does not learn to mobilize it on a written or oral philosophical task. Neither can an answer key of a *dissertation* (*corrigé de dissertation*) solve the problem because the student is then confronted with the limits of imitation: The personal experience of a philosophy teacher is in line with research on learning, which attests that receiving advice or seeing a model is not enough to ensure its active appropriation; saying how to do things is not enough to do them well, because what is proposed (the answer key), which is a finished product, does not say much about the processes involved in achieving it, and above all about the means of overcoming the difficulties encountered, which are the two conditions for success for the student. The illusion may come (and once came in a system where philosophy students were strongly socially and academically selected) from the ease of some culturally privileged students to transpose the model into a scheme of thought and action that is quite easily appropriated, which is no longer the case for most students, who then find themselves in philosophical failure with mass philosophical teaching.

Therefore, it is necessary in teacher training to clarify this approach: what is a competence, a competency-based approach, a competency-based approach in philosophy? What are the competences in philosophy sought for students (Tozzi 2007)? What are the levels of competences targeted in a progressive way? How to acquire them? How to mobilize internal (knowledge, experience, etc.) and external resources to develop them? What difficulties do students encounter in acquiring knowledge, mobilizing their resources, developing

---

<sup>14</sup> Conservatoire nationale des arts et métiers

<sup>15</sup> See certain approaches of the philosophy sector of the GFEN; see their journal *Pratiques de la philosophie*, or the current thesis of Jacques Le Montagner in Montpellier 3.

philosophical competences? How can we support them to overcome these obstacles? What are the teacher's competences to teach them to philosophize? (Tozzi 2007).

This implies redefining the desirable competencies of a philosophy teacher in the framework of a competency-based approach to the discipline: not only knowing how to write a *dissertation*, build a lesson or explain a text, as it is required of candidates in competitive examinations. But knowing how to help students develop philosophical competences. This also presupposes a training of trainers of philosophy teachers consistent with this perspective.

It's a huge project, which is part of a logic of rupture rather than continuity. It comes up against the regression of overall training time, which is now very short. The teachers have all the more the tendency to reproduce the teaching model received at university, which they have unconsciously imbued themselves with, and which will then steer their practice in the classroom: very masterful, focused essentially on philosophical content, without professional preoccupation. This would require a strong professional dimension in both initial and continuing education, including in competitive examinations, and then to prepare for entry into the profession (a profession can be learned, and not only on the job). However, trainers are chosen from among those who are models of the prevailing paradigm, and hardly from among the innovators.

The competency-based approach indeed requires an evolution of the professional identity of the philosophy teacher, which arouses a lot of resistance in relation to corporate habitus. It is necessary to decentralize part of one's course, to be concerned with what is going on in the students' heads, with their real work in the proposed activities, without having the impression of "stooping down", without sticking to simple prescriptions, in short, to have a real pedagogical concern, to enter into a didactic logic of learning, of accompanying processes, of paying attention to the difficulties of the path, of constructing devices and exercises that favor acquisition. Moreover, it is often the teaching problems encountered in the field that lead beginning teachers, and more and more experienced ones, to question the relevance of certain methods, and to adapt to a new, complex, difficult situation.

It is a different situation that we are confronted with in the primary level, where attention to the pupils as children and learners is more prevalent, and where a pedagogical culture is more widely shared. However, training in philosophical discussion proves necessary, for here it presupposes an evolution of the teacher's relationship to knowledge, too: the teacher intervenes only rarely or not at all by making substantive contributions to a discussion; of his or her relationship to the word: in a discussion, it is the schoolchildren's word that is sought and favored; and of his or her relationship to power in the classroom: in systems inspired by institutional pedagogy, functions are delegated to the children (chairperson, reformer, etc.).

It is also and above all, contrary to *terminale* where philosophy professionals teach, the absence of a philosophical culture that is at issue here. Hence the need to clarify for school teachers the basic philosophical capacities and their level of complexity, because it is their consideration by the schoolchildren in the debate that will essentially engage the type of intervention of the teacher, his philosophical vigilance towards intellectual demands. For example, "Why are you saying this?" encourages the child to argue and "What difference is there between friend and buddy?" leads to the activity of conceptualization. It can also be useful

that on the themes addressed, teachers know some useful notions (e.g. on happiness, the difference between pleasure and joy), some reference points (or: when we say “can we” are we talking about the possible or about the desirable?) and some philosophical conceptions (e.g. friendship according to Aristotle).

### **Conclusion**

The competency-based approach in philosophy is now a construction site of philosophy didactics. And it really is under construction. For some more time, certainly, because of the resistance of the milieu to this approach on the one hand, and the theoretical and practical difficulties it faces on the other.

A few years ago, the notions of learning and competence were banned from philosophy curricula (we still do not find the notion of progressivity). They ‘smelled’ too distinctly of the business world and of the language of the educational sciences. In a context where the competency-based approach now permeates all education systems, the curriculum has nevertheless evolved in this direction. The words are there, the competences are named. But they are only little described and analyzed, and this approach is partly contradictory to the primacy of content, the maintenance of canonical exercises. It is out of line with the training provided, which is not sufficiently professionalized, and the majority of the profession’s habits, which are still centered on the master’s discourse and his “lesson”.

The milieu resists, and the students encourage it to adapt to new model because the old model is little in touch – except for the heirs – with a mass philosophical teaching, which presupposes another attitude towards the philosophical failure of students, which is partly that of its teaching. The competency-based approach is not without criticism.

The concept is not yet sufficiently stabilized at the scientific level (cognitive psychology for example); the way in which students can mobilize internal and external resources is insufficiently explained, which affects the types of support available to help them overcome the obstacles encountered; the approach is still too prescriptive, not close enough to the “study gestures of students”; any drift towards a rebranding of a pedagogy based on reductive learning objectives or towards “évaluationnite” (the obsession with evaluation) is not ruled out.

However, this approach is promising. It should mitigate the rejection of “pedagogy” since it does not set knowledge and competences against each other, since in tasks the latter mobilize the former. It specifies, for both teachers and students, what is expected of the apprentice philosophers to do in the proposed philosophical learning situations. Which is a clarification that is indispensable to give everyone a point of reference in this approach. It is situated in a perspective of learning, of progressiveness, taking into account the work of the students. It develops in teachers an attitude of accompaniment attentive to their difficulties. It seems democratic to me, by its concern to fight against philosophical failure and to make philosophizing accessible to all.

I see it as part of UNESCO’s perspective to extend philosophy, in a perspective of dialogue and peace between peoples, to all publics: by starting philosophical awakening as early as possible, from primary education onwards, and by extending it into the city (*café philo*, adult education centers, etc.).

This is why I propose this approach by competences, by diversifying these competences in wider situations and tasks: a diffusion among children and in the city of “discussions with a philosophical aim” and of “philosophical workshops” of philosophical discussion, writing and reading; a diversification of forms of writing, reflecting the diversity of “philosophical genres” in the history of philosophy (aphorism, dialogue, essay, letter, interview, newspaper etc.); a multiplicity of media for reflection: philosophical texts, but also myths, children’s books, literature, artistic productions, and audiovisual media.

## References

- Aristote, *Ethique de Nicomaque*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1965.
- Bucheton, D. (ed.) (2009), *L’agir enseignant: des gestes professionnels ajustés*, Toulouse: Octarès Editions.
- Chirouter, E. (2008), *A quoi pense la littérature de jeunesse? Portée philosophique de la littérature et pratiques à visée philosophique au cycle 3 de l’école élémentaire*, thèse de Sciences de l’éducation, Montpellier 3.
- Cossutta, F. (2000), *Problèmes de méthode dans la lecture des textes philosophiques*, Thèse Paris 1 Sorbonne.
- Del Rey, A. (2010), *A l’école des compétences – De l’éducation à la fabrique de l’élève performant*, La Découverte.
- Descartes, R., *Méditations métaphysiques, Méditation 1*.
- Gérard, F.-M. (2008), *Evaluer des compétences. Guide pratique*, De Boeck, Bruxelles.
- Hirtt, N. (2010), L’approche par compétences: Une mystification pédagogique, *Questions d’orientation* N° 1.
- Jonnaert Ph. et al. (2009), *Curriculum et compétences, un cadre opérationnel*, De Boeck.
- Le Boterf, G. (1994), *De la compétence. Essai sur un attracteur étrange*, Les Editions d’organisation, Paris.
- Le Boterf, G. (1997), *De la compétence à la navigation professionnelle*, Les Editions d’organisation, Paris.
- Meirieu, P. (1989), *Apprendre...oui mais comment*, Paris, ESF.
- Perrenoud, P. (1997), *Construire des compétences dès l’école*, Paris, ESF.
- Perrenoud, P. (2004), *Dix nouvelles compétences pour enseigner*, Paris, ESF.
- Romainville M. et al (1998), Réformes: à ceux qui s’interrogent sur les compétences et leur évaluation, *Forum pédagogie*.
- Talbot, L. (2009), Peut-on améliorer ses pratiques d’enseignement? *X.Y. Zep. Bulletin du Centre Alain Savary* 34, 6-8.
- Tozzi, M. (1992), *Vers une didactique de l’apprentissage du philosophe*, thèse en sciences de l’éducation, Université Lumière Lyon 2.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (1994), *Etude d’une notion, d’un texte*, CRDP Montpellier.
- Tozzi, M. / Molière, G. (eds.) (1998), *Lecture du texte argumentatif en français et en philosophie*, CRDP de Montpellier.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (1999), *L’oral argumentatif en philosophie*, CRDP Montpellier.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (2000), *Diversifier les formes d’écriture philosophique*, CRDP Montpellier.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (2001), *L’éveil de la pensée réflexive à l’école primaire*, Hachette-CRDP Montpellier.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (2002a), *La discussion philosophique à l’école primaire – Pratiques, formations, recherches*, CRDP Montpellier1.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (2002b), *Nouvelles pratiques philosophiques en classe, enjeux et démarches*, CRDP Bretagne.
- Tozzi, M. (ed.) (2003), *Les activités à philosophie en classe, l’émergence d’un genre?*, CRDP

Bretagne.

- Tozzi, M. et R. Etienne (eds.) (2004): *La discussion en éducation et formation*, l'Harmattan.
- Tozzi, M. (2005), *Penser par soi-même*, 6ème édit., Chronique sociale, Lyon.
- Tozzi, M. (2006), *Débattre à partir des mythes à l'école et ailleurs*, Chronique sociale, Lyon.
- Tozzi, M. (2007), Quelles compétences développent chez les élèves des discussions à visée philosophique?, *Diotime* n° 33.
- Tozzi, M. / Soulé, Y. / Bucheton, D. (2008), *La littérature en débats: Discussions à visée littéraire et philosophique à l'école primaire*, Sceren-CRDP Montpellier.
- Tozzi, M. (2008), Avec De la question des compétences en philosophie, *Cahiers du Cerfee* n° 24, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, Montpellier 3.
- Tozzi, M. (2009), La didactique de la philosophie en France. Vingt ans de recherche (1989-2009), *Les Cahiers du Cerfee* n° 26.
- UNESCO (2007), *La philosophie, une école de la liberté*, Paris. URL: [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001536/153601F.pdf](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001536/153601F.pdf)
- Usclat, P. (2008), *Le rôle du maître dans la Discussion à Visée Philosophique – L'éclairage de Habermas*, Thèse en sciences de l'éducation à Montpellier 3.

### **How to cite this article**

Tozzi, Michel (2020): A Competency-Based Approach in Philosophy?, *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy* 4 (2), 85–107. URL: [www.philosophie.ch/jdph](http://www.philosophie.ch/jdph)