

# Rise of the Acrobat Teacher

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## Abstract

*It is usually thought that most Albanian youth do not read at all. And yet, Albanian youth today read much more than yesterday, today's youth is an animal lectorem, an animal that reads. This relationship with reading is also manifested in the education system, where it is deeply influenced by the principles of modernity, where the degree has a relative and conditional value. In these conditions, when on the one hand the differentiation produced by the education system does not absolutely guarantee the career of the young person in the labour market and when on the other hand young people massively prefer informative reading to the meaningful one, the teacher is under tremendous pressure to become "acrobat". This is a metaphor that conveys the reality of today's teacher in postmodernism, which we must use to compensate the lack of due reflection and conceptualisation on this phenomenon. But how and why did we get to this point when teachers are asked to be acrobats?*

**Keywords:** *meaning / information /modernity /postmodernism /integration*

## Do our young people read?

The idea has been created that most Albanian youth do not read at all. In fact, it is common not to find any books in Albanian homes. It is just as common to see that libraries are empty. And yet, Albanian youth read much more today than

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yesterday. The usual look of today's teenager is that of a man haunted on his cellphone or computer, reading endless statuses, comments, news, articles and blogs. If we add to these the TV subtitles that catch the attention of Albanians during the 24 hours, we must necessarily come to the conclusion that today's young man is an *animal lectorem*, an animal that reads.

But this young reader is no cause for rejoicing. Rather, it reveals a tragedy of our existence. This tragedy is outlined as soon as we ask questions about the character of the writings that are read mostly by Albanians. And these are informative writings, not meaningful ones. The order behind informative writings cannot be explained only by their simplicity, by the fact that even a person uncultured or untrained in abstract things manages to read them without difficulty. Of course, as a rule man seems to prefer the easy over the difficult. But the preference for informative writing and the rejection of meaningful writing has reasons deeply rooted in human psychic structures.

Information and meaning are not just different things - they are opposite things. Information is a selection between the alternatives contained in reality (Luhmann 1995). In this way information reduces the complexity of reality, eliminating all other alternatives. For example, being informed about the weather means getting the message that "tomorrow will be sunny weather". This information has eliminated other alternatives, which are just as real: rain, snow, wind, eclipses, etc.

Meaning, in spite of information, preserves all alternatives to reality. Meaning expresses not only what happens, but also what could have happened. Thus, reading meaningful writing means reading about something that happened in the context of other alternatives that did not happen but could have happened. Therefore a meaningful writing about the weather would mention the sun, and the rain, and the snow, and the wind, and the eclipses.

The difference between information and meaning clearly exposes the Albanian reader to the informative writings. Information, by reducing the alternatives of reality to only one, at the same time reduces man's uncertainty about the reality where he is. Reality becomes clear, simple and predictable. The young Albanian appears as the man who wants clarity, simplicity and predictability.

But with them come some negative elements, which characterize the tragic situation of the Albanian youth. The point is, clarity, simplicity, and predictability come at a high cost - they pay for themselves by sacrificing freedom and activity. Informative writing creates the idea that there is no alternative: what happened could not have happened otherwise, what happened could only happen to that kind of person, but not us. For example, as we learn about the purchase of a castle by a VIP from the world of spectacle, we conclude that this is another world, "Martian", with no connection to people like us today or the weather. We may be upset or

irritated by the injustice of fate, but it only makes us feel powerless to change the situation and pushes us towards deterministic thoughts.

The resulting apathy is the phenomenon fueled by passivity and deterministic conception of the world. But the reality is complex (Qvortrup 2003) - it carries far more alternatives than what we have chosen, it has within itself much more life than what we live. The trap of informative writing is to blind us so that we do not see alternatives. Today's young man, the one who does not read meaningful writings, is the passive and fatalistic man, the man willing to sacrifice freedom of decision-making according to the motto "after all, things do not change!"

## **How much is a university degree worth?**

This relationship with reading is also manifested in the education system, where it is deeply influenced by the principles of modernity, where the degree has a relative and conditional value. The German theorist Niklas Luhmann says that for man, to live in modern society, means to participate in it only through the roles he plays, that is, using only a part of his physical and intellectual capacity, only that part which helps perform the role (Luhmann 1982). And this means that in modern society precious things like money, power and prestige of man are determined by the roles he plays in the systems of society. The systems of modern society are politics, economics, justice, religion, art, science, education, health, mass media, family, sports, and intimacy. In each of them, a person can play a role, important or not, that brings him money or not, that increases his prestige or reduces it.

For graduates, this means that the prestige given to them by university degrees in the education system translates into money in the economic system, ie in a well-paid job. But why does this not always happen and, in some countries, such as Albania, it rarely happens? Should we go back to the idea that a university degree has no value at all? This issue is related to the integration of modern society. Luhmann tells us that this society is characterized by low positive integration and high negative integration (Luhmann 2004). So, in modern society, having an important role in one of its systems does not necessarily mean that you will have an important role in other systems. This is what low positive integration of society says: having a university degree (important role in education, academic merit) does not necessarily lead to a good job (important role in the economy, economic well-being). The opposite is said by the high negative integration of society: not having brings not having. Not having a university degree almost necessarily means that you will not have a well-paid job, you will not have power and you will not have prestige.

There are times, however, when not having brings brings. There are times when people who are not educated enough, or with poor academic results, manage to have power, money and prestige. In these cases, the shore of non-possession and the shore of possession are joined by the bridge of corruption, and other times the bridge of crime. Only through corruption and crime does the low positive integration of society become high. This is frustrating for graduates who do not have these tools, as they have to compete in an unfair environment and see their chances diminish. However, the value of a university degree is not zero. It lies in the distinction between positive and negative integration of society. Having a university degree does not necessarily ensure a good living in economic and social terms; but it gives you the chance to have it. On the other hand, not having a university degree (and not even having corrupt and criminal means) guarantees a poor economic and social life and gives you no chance to improve it.

## The acrobat teacher

In these conditions, when on the one hand the differentiation produced by the education system does not absolutely guarantee the career of the young person in the labor market and when on the other hand young people massively prefer informative reading to the meaningful one, the teacher is under tremendous pressure to become “acrobats”. The term ‘acrobat’ has come to Albanian and other European languages from ancient Greek. *Acrobatos* means to walk on tiptoe and climb up. The teacher (and pedagogue) today stands for hours teaching, but not because he fails to get inspired when he is sitting; in fact, it does so to capture the attention of pupils and students and to maintain order in the classroom. Teachers today are required to use interactive methods, Powerpoint, movies, metaphors, anecdotes, humor and illustrations as much as possible. In other words it is required to please the audience of pupils and students, just as acrobats delight their audience by walking on a rope at their fingertips. The assumption is that the satisfied audience manages to extract more. But in fact, as happened to me when I explained the concept of the essential self in the subject of Philosophy and used the metaphor of the onion, to show that the self has no essence, when I asked the students in the exam about the concept of the essential self, they only gave me the answer the metaphor used and no definition or analysis. Quite satisfied and not at all learning.

But how and why did we get to this point when teachers are asked to be acrobats? Of course, acrobatics as a solution comes from the way the problem is formulated. Thus, the French philosopher Finkielkraut, in his book *The Undoing of Thought* (Finkielkraut 1988), formulates the problem of pedagogy by contrasting

school with student. According to him, the school is a modern institution, while the student is post-modern. In other words, the school does the homework, says 'should', while the student is driven by desire, says 'I want.' Formulated as a conflict, the pedagogical problem of passing on knowledge from one generation to another has only two potential solutions: either the school will become extremely authoritarian, strict and violent to teach the student what it needs, or the school will become acrobatic by submitting to the latter's wishes. Both solutions are used, but the latter is much more widespread.

The point is, both of these solutions are dysfunctional. The first violates, but does not teach, while the second pleases, but it also does not teach. Violence makes triumph a school without students and acrobatics make triumph students without school. This problem is unsolvable if it continues to be formulated as proposed by Finkelkraut. Among other things, the thesis that the school is modern and the student is postmodern, does not even stand by its terms. Thus, has not the school always been modern, has it not always tended to teach the task, what should be taught? And on the other hand, has not the student always been post-modern, inclined to place desire over the task? This conflict, then, is not today, but has always been and will continue to be. The fact that in the past this conflict was successfully resolved should make us think about where we are going wrong. Maybe we should reformulate the problem of pedagogy, no longer as a conflict between the school and the student, but as a problem related to the concept we have of the teacher and teaching?

The German philosopher Heidegger says that teaching is a giving, a offering (Heidegger 1995). But what is offered in teaching is not the thing to be learned, as the student is simply instructed to learn what he already has. In case the student gets something that is offered to him, he does not learn. He learns only when he experiences what he takes as something that he has within himself. Therefore, teaching means nothing more than letting others learn, bringing each other to learning. Teaching, says Heidegger, is more difficult than learning. This is because only he who can truly learn - and as long as he can do so - is the only one capable of teaching. The real teacher differs from the student only in the fact that the teacher can learn better and wants to learn more sincerely. When teaching, it is the teacher who learns the most.

Today we are far from Heidegger's concept. The teacher is seen as omniscient and so sees himself. The arrogance of the omniscient is then conveyed in communication with pupils and students, who are treated as tabula rasa, like plasticine that passively waits to be shaped according to interest, agenda and objectives. Of course, this does not go unnoticed by students and the consequence is known: they refuse to learn. And in these conditions, when he does not let others learn, acrobatics is not a solution either. It resembles that story that tells of Socrates, the eminent Greek

philosopher, who one day meets a sophist. The Sophist asks, ‘Are you still standing there on the street, saying the same thing about the same thing?’ Socrates replies, ‘Yes, this I’m doing. And you, who are so smart, how is it possible that you never say the same thing about the same thing?’

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