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**The Didactics of Social Sciences in the Algerian University :
A Socio-Anthropological Study at the University of Mascara**

تعليمية العلوم الاجتماعية في الجامعة الجزائرية:
دراسة سوسيو-أنثروبولوجية بجامعة معسكر

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Abstract:

Social sciences are broadly concerned with understanding human behavior, social relations, and the diverse interactions that emerge from individuals' engagement with their lived realities. These realities are characterized by the intersection of multiple domains and phenomena, reflecting the complexity of human life and society. Despite the marginal position often attributed to the social sciences within Algerian society, these disciplines continue to maintain a significant presence across Algerian universities.

Given their distinctive nature and subject matter, the social sciences require specialized pedagogical and didactic approaches for the effective transmission of knowledge and the training of students in both theoretical and practical dimensions. In this context, two key questions arise: What is the current state of social science didactics in Algerian universities? And how does it influence the academic development and competencies of students enrolled in these disciplines?

To address these questions, this paper adopts a socio-anthropological perspective and draws on field interviews conducted with a sample of social sciences professors at the University of Mascara.

Keywords: Didactics; Social sciences; Didactic transposition; Knowledge Transmission; Representations.

المخلص:

تشتغل العلوم الاجتماعية كما هو متعارف عليه على فهم الذات البشرية والتفاعلات اليومية المختلفة التي ينتجها الفاعلون الاجتماعيون في إطار معاشتهم لواقعهم الحياتي المتنوع، والذي يحمل في ثناياه تداخلا بين العديد من المجالات والظواهر. وبالرغم من التهميش الذي تعاني منه هذه العلوم في المجتمع الجزائري، إلا أن ذلك لم يمنع من تواجدها الدائم في مختلف الجامعات الجزائرية.

وتستلزم هذه العلوم بطبيعتها وماهيتها تعليمية خاصة لنقل المعارف المرتبطة بها، وتدريب الطلبة بالشكلين: العملي التطبيقي والتنظيري. ومن هنا يمكن طرح التساؤل الآتي: ما واقع تعليمية العلوم الاجتماعية في الجامعات الجزائرية؟ وما هو تأثيرها على مستوى الطلبة المنتمين لهذه العلوم؟

ومن هنا تسعى هذه الورقة للإجابة على التساؤل المطروح سابقا اعتمادا على دراسة سوسيو-أنتروبولوجية مرتكزة على مقابلات ميدانية مع عينة من أساتذة العلوم الاجتماعية بجامعة معسكر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليمية، العلوم الاجتماعية، النقلة التعليمية، نقل المعارف، التمثلات.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Social sciences constitute fields of inquiry dedicated to the study of human reality and the various conditions that shape, produce, and continuously transform it. This reality is dynamic and constantly evolving, resulting from the interaction between local and global influences and the interconnection of multiple systems, including economic, political, religious, cultural, and educational structures, among others.

Given that the primary focus of these disciplines is human life and social experience, they require specialized training

programs for students as well as pedagogical and didactic approaches that reflect the distinctive nature of social sciences. Such approaches must take into account the specific characteristics, issues, and themes addressed by these disciplines. Didactics, whether understood in its broader common-sense meaning or within the more specialized field of educational sciences, occupies a central place in the educational process. Its primary concern is the organization, improvement, and development of teaching and learning practices, with the aim of facilitating the transmission of knowledge across various

domains, including literary, linguistic, historical, technical, and, more specifically, social science knowledge.

Disciplines within the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, and educational sciences, have devoted considerable attention to the study of didactics and its role in enhancing educational practices. Their efforts have focused on understanding and improving the teaching and learning processes in general, and those related to social sciences in particular. Against this background, the present study seeks to address the following questions: What is the current state of social science didactics in Algerian universities? And what impact does this specialized form of didactics have on students enrolled in these disciplines?

For the purpose of answering the questions raised and subjecting them to field testing, the following hypothesis was formulated:

- The reality of the didactics of social sciences in the Algerian university is consistent with the theory of didactic transposition in the transmission of knowledge to students, according to the representations of professors.

2. Conceptual Definitions:

2.1. Didactics of Social Sciences:

By this concept is meant the didactics that targets **“the aspects and components of the educational process in order to renew and develop teaching and learning”**¹ within the social fields, which, at Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara, are generally represented by psychology, philosophy, and sociology. This didactics is also concerned with **“planning educational and instructional objectives, monitoring and modifying them, while taking into account the methods and means that make it possible to achieve these objectives.”**²

2.2. Didactic Transposition:

This term was introduced by the sociologist Verret in 1975 and was subsequently adopted by Chevallard as an appropriate approach in the didactics of

mathematics. Didactic transposition is considered one of the most prominent theories of didactics and comprises two principal types: an internal type and an external type. By didactic transposition is meant: **“the process through which knowledge is transferred from the level of precise scientific knowledge to knowledge that is teachable and learnable. In this form, it requires a capacity for transformation, making it a genuine educational creative act designed to meet the needs of teaching.”**³

2.3. Knowledge Transmission:

This refers to the process of transmitting the foundational elements of social sciences as sciences possessing their own nature, subjects, and methodology. In this context, the knowledge transmitted to students varies between that which is purely methodological and theoretical on the one hand and that which is practical and applied on the other.

2.4. Professors' Representations:

The concept of representation is one of the fundamental concepts in the social sciences. In this paper, it refers to the set of perceptions and viewpoints, whether collective or individual, held by professors specialized in teaching social sciences. These representations frame their perspective on the subject under study (didactics) as well as their practices within this context.

3. Field Study :

In order to test the proposed hypothesis, a field study (socio-anthropological) was conducted during which a sample of social sciences professors from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara, were questioned regarding the didactics of the subjects they teach. The details of this field study are as follows:

3.1. Research Sample:

The research sample that was interviewed consisted of ten (10) professors selected according to a non-probability sampling method consistent with the qualitative approach and based on purposive

(typical) sampling. The characteristics of the sample are as follows:

- Professors of both genders teaching first-year Social Sciences students.
- Age: Thirty-eight (38) years and above.
- Original specializations: Sociology, Psychology, and Philosophy.
- Academic rank: Assistant Professors, Grade “A,” and Lecturers, Grades “A” and “B.”
- Professional experience: More than three (03) years.

3.2. Research Techniques:

The field study and the collection of field data relied on both participant observation and interviews, with the aim of gathering the largest possible amount of data and observations relevant to the topic, before proceeding to analyze them in a manner consistent with the context of the paper.

3.3. Methodological Approach:

The ethnographic method was adopted, as it is associated with the field study of individuals and groups through direct immersion or participation in order to identify their representations, practices, and behaviors. Ethnographic research aims **“to uncover the meanings underlying social action through the researcher’s direct involvement in the interactions that constitute the social reality of the group under study.”**⁴

In addition, the qualitative approach was employed in analyzing the data collected from the field.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

4.1. Didactics According to Professors’ Representations:

At the outset, it is important to point out a matter of considerable significance to the topic, namely that all the professors interviewed and constituting the research sample in this field study unanimously agreed that didactics is fundamentally associated with the method of transmitting the knowledge and symbols constituting the social sciences to students (particularly first-year students), at a level consistent with their cognitive capacities on the one hand and their analytical abilities on the other.

This is especially because the knowledge framework of the social sciences relies directly and explicitly on the analysis of data of various kinds through mastery of the diverse forms of knowledge, methodologies, and processes that make such analysis possible, foremost among them: description, explanation, and understanding.

Therefore, dealing with the concept of didactics means engaging primarily with the transmission of knowledge and symbols to students for the purpose of building within them a corpus of social research knowledge through which they acquire the principal elements associated with the social sciences in general, in preparation for directing them in the second year toward social science specializations that correspond both to their abilities and to their intellectual interests.

The professors also unanimously agreed that there is a difference between the didactics of social studies subjects at the secondary-school level, which are essentially centered on history and geography, and the didactics of the social sciences—sociology, psychology, and philosophy—at the university level. According to them, the former deals with topics that are relatively rigid, as they described them, and are primarily theoretical, except for matters related to the use of teaching aids such as maps and textbooks. The latter, by contrast, addresses topics related to social actors who **“possess consciousness, self-awareness, and who attribute a system of goals, meanings, and significations to their actions”**⁵, in the words of Anthony Giddens. Consequently, the subjects of the social sciences are essentially concerned with the study of social and psychological facts and phenomena that are relative and constantly changing, through the use of specialized scientific methodologies. Therefore, they require didactics that is consistent with their nature. In this regard, the respondents emphasized the necessity of employing didactic transposition because it **“includes the transformations that knowledge undergoes in order to become**

teachable”⁶. Here lies the necessity of adapting theoretical data in particular so that it corresponds to students’ analytical capacities, and of drawing examples from everyday lived reality in order to bring ideas and concepts closer to the student, thereby ensuring the understanding and learning of the course content by the largest possible number of students.

Upon examining the course contents offered to first-year Social Sciences students, one finds them to be highly rich both in terms of diversity and epistemological depth. However, there is a corresponding difficulty in transmitting this content in its original epistemological form. Consequently, the professor finds himself obliged to make numerous modifications and adjustments without departing from the general framework of the content, so as to be able to transmit knowledge to students in a manner that they can comprehend. Students then move from a position of reception to the situations of action, formulation, and validation, which will be discussed in greater detail later. In order to carry out these modifications and adaptations, the professor must possess a thorough mastery of the epistemological content being taught, a condition that all professors agreed constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for didactic transposition.

As a result of the foregoing, it can be said that didactics, according to the representations of first-year Social Sciences professors at Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara, revolves primarily around the method or manner through which social sciences are taught, provided that this method is compatible with students’ intellectual and analytical capacities. This is, in principle, consistent with Dolanher’s conception of didactics.

4.2. The Didactics of Social Sciences Between Theory and Practice:

Didactics itself is considered by many researchers to be one of the most ambiguous, controversial, and diversely interpreted concepts in the field of education, a position adopted, for example,

by Galisson in his dictionary. Some regard it as an autonomous branch of the educational sciences, while others view it as a branch of pedagogy whose subject matter is teaching, **or as synonymous with pedagogy or education.**⁷ This corresponds to the usage adopted by Lalande.

However, according to the field study, it was observed that didactics, according to the professors’ representations, as previously mentioned, seeks to achieve a practical and applied objective centered on: how to teach, how to ensure understanding of educational content among the largest possible number of learners, and how to motivate them to move beyond mere reception toward action and practice, through the set of educational interactions occurring among the components of the didactic process: the professor, the student, and the educational content of the course. These interactions reflect the interplay between pedagogical, educational, and epistemological relationships.

The knowledge transmitted to students varies between theoretical and practical-applied forms according to the nature of the course being taught. Nevertheless, professors emphasize the necessity of adopting a didactics in which theory and practice are integrated and intertwined. Examples from everyday reality are employed to explain and interpret abstract knowledge, while theoretical knowledge is used to analyze practical field situations within a specific cognitive framework.

According to the professors interviewed, this method ensures the realization of different educational situations. After explaining the course content, the professor attempts to stimulate the situation of action among students to the greatest possible extent in order to conduct a preliminary assessment of their comprehension of the transmitted knowledge. The situation of action is primarily based on students presenting assignments during supervised practical sessions, where they discuss what they have previously received and understood in lectures. These assignments

generally include preparing research papers on specific topics, concepts, or phenomena through consultation of specialized references and sources; preparing book reviews of particular works; or conducting field surveys related to the subject in order to acquire practical training in entering the field and carrying out field studies.

Students present these assignments according to a situation of formulation that is consistent with the language constituting the educational discourse associated with the didactics of social sciences, its content, and its terminology, through the use of specialized concepts transmitted to them by the professor mainly during lectures and through corrections of the mistakes identified in practical sessions.

Thirdly, the student employs what is related to the situation of validation in presenting his or her topic, that is, by providing evidence and supporting arguments to substantiate the claims made in the assignment. This is achieved through combining theoretical and field data obtained from readings and fieldwork on the one hand, and drawing upon an understanding of the educational content presented by the professor during the process of knowledge transmission on the other.

In another context, the professors interviewed in the field emphasized the importance of internal didactic transposition over external didactic transposition in producing the various educational situations referred to above. This is because the former is generated by professors who are directly involved in the educational interaction process, enabling them to make modifications and adaptations according to their actual observations of the extent to which students interact with and comprehend the transmitted knowledge, both theoretically and in the field. External transposition, by contrast, is viewed as being produced by professors responsible for designing educational content but who remain distant from the specific local context of each university and from the level

of cognitive and educational interaction taking place within it.

As a result of the preceding data, it can be concluded that social sciences professors emphasize the integration and combination of the abstract theoretical knowledge constituting these disciplines with practical and applied knowledge in order to achieve the objectives of the educational process and realize its various situations, on the basis of a didactics specifically concerned with knowledge transmission.

4.3. Obstacles to the Didactics of Social Sciences and Means of Overcoming Them:

Like the didactics of other subjects, the didactics of social sciences faces obstacles that, under certain circumstances, hinder the achievement of educational objectives and the realization of its various educational situations. These obstacles consist of a set of barriers that impede the transmission of knowledge within educational contexts. According to the field data obtained both through interviews with professors and participant observation, the most significant obstacles are as follows:

- Difficulty in comprehending the abstract foundations of these sciences, particularly those related to the major theories produced within the social sciences, whether belonging to the classical tradition or to modern and contemporary approaches. Consequently, students experience difficulty in progressing to the educational situations of action, formulation, and validation.
- Difficulty among learners in mastering the specialized concepts that constitute the linguistic, cognitive, and symbolic framework of the social sciences.
- The overlap of knowledge presented across different courses.
- Students' absence from lectures, which may be considered the greatest obstacle facing the didactics of social sciences.

In order to overcome these difficulties, or what Bachelard referred to as epistemological obstacles, which professors can observe directly in the field, the respondents proposed a specialized didactics

centered on internal didactic transposition, in which theoretical and field dimensions are integrated, as previously mentioned. They also advocated reinforcing knowledge transmission through intensive practical exercises carried out by students in order to consolidate knowledge in their minds and enable them to think through new situations appropriate to the diverse contexts constituting the corpus of their specializations.

According to the respondents, this specialized didactics has had a noticeable impact among professors who employ it, particularly regarding students' mastery of social science knowledge and their ability to engage with various phenomena. This contrasts with professors who rely on classical methods based solely on rote transmission.

3. CONCLUSION:

It can ultimately be said that didactics in general, and the didactics of social sciences in particular, despite the obstacles they face and the divergence of opinions surrounding them, remain the fundamental and direct applied approach upon which the educational process relies for the purpose of transmitting various forms of scientific knowledge, whether theoretical or practical, to students, and of building a

knowledge base within these disciplines. This serves the development of social research and fosters the hope of achieving societal development and well-being.

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