

Humanities and Education: A State(ment) of the Arts

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ABSTRACT

This article positions *Humanities and Education* as a platform for research on the reciprocal relationship between the humanities and education. It argues that humanities subjects in (particularly secondary) education extend beyond school achievement and qualification, fostering socialization, subjectification, critical literacy and understanding of socio-cultural discourses. It also identifies these subjects' marginalization through economic and measurement-driven educational agendas. Consequently, this article calls for interdisciplinary, methodologically diverse and authentic research addressing teachers, pupils, schools and the broader socio-political contexts of humanities education research.

KEYWORDS

humanities; education;
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"Growth [is] a very complicated adjustment of the subjective feelings and emotions to the objective world, and [...] the quality of thought and understanding, and all the variations of personality and character, depend to a large extent on the success or precision of this adjustment." (Read, 1943, p. 7)

The study of humanities and education is challenging and appealing in many ways. First of all, the combination goes both ways: education as object of study in the humanities as well as humanities subjects in formal education. Education, as we understand it, signifies the purposeful process of learning and development. This covers an area from Jerome Bruner's (1960, p. 9) description that "the most general objective of education [is] that it cultivates excellence" to Humboldt's (1793) concept of *Bildung*. The main focus of this journal will be on formal, secondary education, although we explicitly welcome contributions on informal and nonformal education, as well as primary and tertiary education.

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Secondly, the humanities, as “the branches of learning (such as philosophy, arts, or languages) that investigate human constructs [...] and concerns” (Merriam Webster) cover a wide range of subjects. The field is wide enough to be hard to delimit (Merriam Webster’s suggestion to draw the line at “anthropology or economics” has been long overtaken by scholarly practice). A pragmatic approach is to focus on the institutional contexts of researchers working on educational subjects related to this definition of the humanities. This field ranges from the Anglo-Saxon field of Critical Cultural Studies to the German Geisteswissenschaften, rooted in the Humboldtian ideal of Bildung [as the holistic development of the individual]. This journal focuses primarily on the school subjects within this domain: first and foreign languages, history and classics, the arts, philosophy, and religion. As these subjects are often aimed at the personal and social development of pupils and students, broader learning outcomes, from literacy to creativity to social-emotional learning, are more than welcome.

Finally, education around the globe is focused on building the foundations of citizenship, before any further specialization towards practical or academic professions. Building citizenship presupposes (critical) literacy, (multi)lingual skills, knowledge of the historical context of societies, and (inter)cultural skills. All of this makes the humanities an essential and integral part of any educational system. Classroom practices concerning the teaching and learning about human expressions, behaviors, languages, and ideas constitute the core of humanities education research and thus of this journal.

Beyond school success

The humanities have been seen as the foundation of human learning since the origins of the modern western educational system. This foundational nature of the humanities as school subjects underscores not just their importance as a field of study but also connects the humanities to their purpose beyond the school (cf. Bod, 2013). By their very nature, humanities subjects impact the development of pupils as citizens.

This societal imperative for humanities education is often described in terms of Biesta’s (2010) triptych qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Throughout much of his oeuvre, Biesta argues that education has focused too much on qualifications as a learning outcome and has neglected the other two aims, which are in fact the focus of subjects in the humanities. The marginalized status of the humanities was forcefully highlighted by Nussbaum in her *Not for Profit* (2024). In this essay, she lays bare the crisis in education that was caused by a neglect of the humanities. This, she states, is a grave danger to democracy. The precarious position of the humanities has recently been underscored for the field of arts and culture by Lahmann (2025) in a global study of the status of the field. Lahmann blames “the push for schools to equip students with skills that support labor market readiness and contribute to economic growth” (2025, p. 135) for the marginal position of the arts in the curriculum, and the same may be said of all humanities subjects. Another example is the history curriculum, shaped by tensions between disciplinary expectations, such as the development of critical historical thinking, and policy-driven priorities. VanSledright (2002) argues that policymakers, “facing what they perceive as more pressing economic and political necessities (cheaper tests, higher perceived reliability), typically favor assessing what children know rather than what they can do with

what they know” (p. 1108). More recently, researchers have argued that what we know and how we think are inextricably linked (Counsell, 2000; Van der Vlies, 2022).

The number of high school students choosing a humanities track has been consistently low over the past years, largely due to continued emphasis on the use-value of school subjects in both high schools, tertiary education and politics. Recent research on literature education in the Netherlands further shows that students primarily view the value of such education in terms of qualification-oriented outcomes, such as improved instrumental language proficiency or a broader vocabulary, and far less in terms of socializing and subjectifying aims, such as the development of empathy, the broadening of horizons, or critical citizenship (Dera, 2025).

In emphasizing the importance of the personal and social learning outcomes of humanities education, we explicitly align with the critique of education voiced by Biesta, Nussbaum and others, and earlier by theorists and pedagogues like Arendt and Freire, on teaching and learning practices that only have relevance within the school context. Roelofs and Terwel (1999) propose an alternative to a school-based curriculum, which they term “authentic pedagogy”: “The knowledge to be acquired has to be true to life, i.e. authentic, and relevant to students’ everyday lives. Students must be able to benefit from their education in their private as well as in their social lives” (Roelofs & Terwel, 1999, p. 201). This constructivist approach emphasizes the “disciplined inquiry in order to produce work that has value beyond success in school” (Saye et al., 2013, p. 90) as the core of learning. In other words, authentic education overcomes the problem of education for its own sake, as for instance reflected in practices of teaching to the test, by focusing on skills and content that are relevant to both the everyday life of pupils and students and to society.

The sociocultural

This societal impetus for education is what connects all humanities subjects in schools, from first and second language learning to philosophy. The relevance of these subjects lies beyond the reproduction of facts. Here too lies a challenge for the field, as this implies forms of instruction and assessment that are often perceived as contrary to school culture and/or educational policy. Because of their innate tendency to look beyond the confines of the school, the humanities are uniquely positioned to connect the social lives of pupils, the school context, and the society of the future. This makes the humanities subjects the optimal location for the democratic role of schooling, as outlined by Dewey (2018).

By transcending the boundaries between school and society, and between the reproduction of facts and the challenges of life, it is important to sensitize pupils to the complexity of sociocultural processes and objects. In line with how Mouffe theorizes the difference between politics and policy on the one hand and “the political” on the other (Mouffe, 2013), this may be described as “the sociocultural”: the dynamic field of historical contexts, communication processes in first and other languages, in art and culture, and in values, religion and philosophy. Whereas society and culture (like politics and policy) may be described in fixed terms, “the sociocultural” is a dynamic field that is formed through discussion, conflict, and misunderstandings. Although the need to educate children and teenagers to understand the systems and their rules (society and culture), as well as the

conflicting practices underneath (the sociocultural) has been recognized often and by many, this multi-layered task of the humanities in education is still an under-researched domain.

Methods and methodologies

Most studies on education in any of the humanities subjects focus on pedagogical processes and the effects of instruction tools. The research field reflects this tendency in the focus of academic journals where these studies may be published (e.g. *Language Teaching Research*; *Language Awareness*; *Learning and Instruction*; *International Journal of Multilingualism*; *Teaching and Teacher Education*). Exceptions are journals where the interplay between the content specific nature of a school subject and the pedagogical and didactic processes find a platform (e.g. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*; *L1*; *History Education Research Journal*). However, what we found lacking was a journal offering a wider scope and bringing together all humanities subjects in education under one roof. *Humanities and Education* has the ambition to be that place.

Educational research is a field that encompasses a wide range of methodological approaches and practices, from quantitative, large-scale inquiries, to ethnographic approaches and single case studies. *Humanities and education* aims to reflect this variety, while recognizing the current imbalance in the field, where more generalist studies on teaching and education, often partly or wholly quantitative and/or quasi-experimental in nature, dominate over discipline- and content-based qualitative studies. We find this a matter of some concern, given the state of the art in our field, where many questions remain unanswered. Discipline-based, in-class assignments, student attitudes towards instruction practices and materials have not received ample attention from academic researchers. Wieman (2014; cf. Meijer, 2014, p. 22) justly described the field of educational research as a domain in need of cutting-edge research, the kind that explores the unknown boundaries of knowledge, theory, and method. Knowledge of these boundary practices is needed before any questionnaire can be drafted.

That said, we welcome all methodological approaches, as well as reflections on methods and methodologies. On the whole, this journal seeks to present a balanced picture of approaches and subjects in order to shed light on all levels of education in humanities subjects. Thus, when we assess the rigor of submissions, this may be reflected in the way an article has systematically developed its quasi-experimental design, but also in the thoroughness of the coding process for participant observation in a classroom, or in the systematic way a scoping review of studies on a didactic discussion has been conducted. In line with our earlier remarks on the boundary-crossing nature of humanities subjects, we also welcome more innovative methodological approaches that challenge the epistemological claims of qualitative inquiry in educational research, such as post-qualitative research (cf. LeGrange, 2018).

Perspectives

This journal welcomes contributions from all domains of education in humanities subjects. However, true to our statement above, we wish to emphasize the entangled nature of the humanities subjects and also to encourage authors to submit studies on interdisciplinary projects, skills transfer, and cross-cutting themes like citizenship, creativity, literacy,

language education and foreign language learning as cross-cutting practices, multilingual education, intercultural competence, or collaboration across school subjects. To start the discussion, suggest possible perspectives, as well as to show some of the topics that interest us as editors, we will discuss four points of departure: the teacher, the pupil, the school, and society, government and politics.

The teacher

It seems obvious to state that teachers play a pivotal role in education. Yet, their role is not always fully understood. Much of what teachers do is based on their self-perception as a professional and on their teacher beliefs (Akkerman & Meijer, [2011](#); Kenny & Morrissey, [2020](#)). Moreover, teacher identity is not a stable given and may even consist of multiple identities, as has been shown in the case of visual arts teachers (O'Brien Braun et al., [2025](#)). Research and theory on education have focused more on learning and instructional processes than on teachers and teaching (Biesta, [2010](#), p. 15), with the exception of the vast body of research on teacher education, which, in our view, differs from the everyday practice of being a teacher in school. Another major strand in research focuses on teachers' epistemological beliefs: what they believe about how knowledge is constructed (e.g. Gestsdóttir et al., [2021](#); Voet & De Wever, [2016](#)). Teachers often hold mixed epistemologies (both positivist and interpretive views). Their beliefs strongly shape whether they teach multiperspectivity or single narratives (Gestsdóttir et al., [2021](#)). An urgent question is what it means to be a teacher in one of the humanities subjects in a multicultural and multilingual world where history and identity have become zones of conflict. How do multilingual and multicultural learning environments influence teachers' ideas on history and identity?

The pupil

As humanities subjects in schools address everyday aspects of the lives of the children and youth in the classroom, including their history and that of their country, their own language and the other languages spoken in their social circles, their culture and that of their home country, the pupils' perspectives on teaching and learning in the humanities are essential. In order to make humanities subjects relevant beyond the school context, an authentic approach is required (Anderson & Milbrandt, [1998](#); Heijnen, [2015](#)). This means that learning should be centered around the culture, language and history of the student, that learning tasks must be derived from relevant professional practices, e.g. in translation work or in museums, and that learning must be situated in societal contexts (Heijnen, [2015](#), p. 280).

The school

Classrooms and board rooms demarcate the space of possibles for teaching and learning. Both the physical space and the normative space are crucial to a full understanding of education. In their article "Ecologies of Collective Imagination", Glăveanu et al. ([2025](#)), for instance, study collective forms of imagination as a means to foster environmental awareness and reparative justice. Their article diverges from traditional scholarly publications by dividing the article into short essays written by each of the authors, in

which they explore a concept developed by Hay (2022) on the basis of earlier work by Craft et al. (2014) on “spaces of possibility”. This concept is typical of the approach taken in much humanities education research in that it brings together the practical and the theoretical sides of the school subject, while explicitly connecting it to societal outcomes.

Society, government, and politics

The expectations in society and politics of the purpose of education strongly impact the perceived place and purpose of humanities subjects in schools. On the one hand, the political climate and public opinion influence which school subjects are seen as more or less relevant. On the other hand, the very nature of humanities subjects positions them in a specific role with regard to larger societal debates on the dominant logic of economic thinking, technological developments, cultural differences, or the unicity of current societal challenges. While these circumstances may explain the relatively marginal position of the humanities subjects in schools, they also prepare the ground for exploring the purpose of these subjects. We welcome research articles that explore these discussions, as well as contributions that analyze classroom practices where such themes are discussed.

Closing remarks

What we have not discussed in this opening article is the position of education in the humanities. This too, deserves some attention. The humanities are one of the oldest fields of research, with their roots in theories on poetry, theatre, visual arts, language, and history in ancient Greece, through early modern and modern studies of the classics, and finally the embedding in the European university system that found its structure in the nineteenth century. Education has been an implicit and explicit goal of most of these forerunners of contemporary humanities research, but (systematic) reflection on education in the humanities was and remains scarce.

In recent years, the valorization of academic research has gained importance in the funding and assessment of universities. In its wake, lesson plans derived from the conclusions of research projects have become standard part of research output, but usually without much specific research into the pedagogy of the field in question. It is our aim to take education back to the heart of (humanities) research, both as an integral part of each discipline as well as a field of research in its own right. Let this journal be a platform for research that highlights the importance of education for the humanities and of the humanities for education.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare none.

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