

Country Report: French-speaking Belgium (Wallonia-Brussels Federation)

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Until recently, Belgium was one of the European countries not to offer any philosophy courses in compulsory education and only in exceptional cases as an optional subject. Admittedly, philosophy graduates had managed to integrate some notions of philosophy into the non-denominational course on morals (*Morale*) as early as 2002, and had then obtained being the only ones entitled to teach this course, but one had to deal with a school program that was ideologically marked by the humanism and atheism of the Belgian secular current and that was not very consistent in its epistemic content. Moreover, being optional, this course was only intended for a part of the students and therefore did not concern all those who chose to follow a course of one of the six recognized religions (Islamic; Judaic; Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant or Anglican Christian).

Today, the situation is quite different: a new course entitled “Philosophy and Citizenship” (*Philosophie et citoyenneté*) has appeared in the compulsory curriculum for students, starting in 2016 for primary school (6-12 years old) and in 2017 for secondary school (12-18 years old), so that today, all Belgian students in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, as long as they are enrolled in public education,¹ are educated in philosophy from a very young age.

The origins of this decision partly explain the lines of tension that run through the reference framework (*Référentiel*) and school programs² and make this course a real challenge for any teacher (and student) who is confronted with it. Indeed, the course was born of three joint pressures: on the one hand, the body of philosophers had been fighting for more than twenty years for philosophy to become a school discipline in Belgium. On the other hand, the November 2015 Paris attacks and the 2016 Brussels bombings and the sometimes somewhat rapid analyses that have been made of them have led politicians to consider that it was urgent to reinforce education for citizenship within schools, beyond the religious or philosophical convictions of the students (it is true that, until then, questions of society were mainly dealt with in religion and morals classes, which precisely separated students into communities). Finally, since religion and morals courses were exempt from the obligation of axiological neutrality imposed on all other courses in the official system, some parents decided to refuse to allow their children

¹ French-speaking Belgium, despite its smallness, has four education networks financed and organized differently: Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (official), official subsidized, non-denominational free subsidized, and denominational free subsidized, see *L'organisation générale de l'enseignement*, URL: <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=25568&navi=2667>.

I am sticking to formal education and its three networks, all of which share the same reference framework and the same program. I put aside the free confessional network, which has chosen not to create a specific course to implement the skills of the reference framework (common to the four networks) and has committed to provide them transversally in the other school subjects.

² There are two reference frameworks, one covering the skills to be acquired between the ages of 6 to 14 years, known as *socle compétences*, and the other covering the ages 14-18 years, known as *terminales compétences*. However, there are three programs: one for primary school, one for the first level of secondary school, and one for the last two levels of secondary school.

to be forced to follow “committed” courses that did not correspond to their own convictions, and they therefore demanded that the Government provides an alternative. Thus, the project of a course of Philosophy and Citizenship was born, which would bring together all the students, at a rate of 1 hour per week if they chose to continue to follow 1 hour of religion or morals, and at a rate of 2 hours per week otherwise.

The project remained to be implemented. The commissions in charge of producing the skills repositories – one for the *socle* (6-14 years old), the other for the *terminales* (14-18 years old) – were composed according to legal standards of network representativeness. They mixed trained philosophers, committed to defend the disciplinary component of the course, and teachers and inspectors from other disciplines who insisted more on the “citizenship” component, interpreting it in various ways. Indeed, there are at least three meanings: civic instruction (a body of knowledge about the State and its institutions), education for democracy through practices (advice, delegation, voting, etc.), the sharing of a “foundation of common values” and respect for standards considered essential to “living together” (a trend close to civic education in France), as desired by the Minister of Education at the time.

The very term “philosophy” was subject of debate: for trained philosophers, it necessarily referred to its academic practice transposed into a school discipline while for most other teachers it was seen as similar to the argumentative discussion inspired by philosophy for children, when it was not understood in the sense of “philosophy” as personal opinion, way of approaching existence or spirituality, etc. The term “philosophy for children” was also used to refer to the way in which philosophy was understood by the teachers (“it’s my philosophy”).

It was therefore necessary to agree not only on the words but also on their articulation. While the introduction of the reference framework of competencies in the *terminales*³ tried to settle the question, there are many remaining marks within the prescripts and in the minds of the teachers of these original dissensions, which are still disturbing the identity of the course. Nevertheless, it was indeed decided to name the course “Philosophy and Citizenship”, thus highlighting philosophy as central, not for its own sake, but as an approach that enlightens citizenship. One of them is therefore a discipline – inspired by the history of philosophy in its methods and resources –, the other is an object of research, since it is a question of “training in a philosophical approach to the issues and practices of citizenship.”⁴

In doing so, citizenship becomes also an educational objective. It is indeed a question of “training in citizenship that is sensitive and open to the issues that work on, question and constantly transform it: political, ethical and bioethical, socio-economic, societal, environmental, cultural, anthropological, etc. issues.”⁵ In line with the theory of the indeterminacy of democracy supported by Claude Lefort, citizenship is being conceived as being called upon to constantly reconfigure itself in confrontation with the issues it faces, such as migratory conflicts, global warming and environmental crises, new information and communication technologies, social revolutionary movements, political disaffection, etc. Consequently, no prior definition

³ Référentiels de compétences – Les compétences terminales.

URL: <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=25189&navi=296>

⁴ *Programme du Cours de Philosophie et Citoyenneté, 2ème et 3ème degrés de l’enseignement secondaire*, p. 22. www.wallonie-bruxelles-enseignement.be/progr/CPC%20-%20Programme%20e%20et%203e%20degrés.pdf

⁵ See note 4.

of citizenship can satisfy the philosopher (and the apprentice-philosopher), who always sees citizenship as a *problem*, which excludes from the outset a normative understanding of education to citizenship in the sense of civics or even pure civic instruction.

It should be noted that this articulation between philosophy and citizenship, while clearly stated and implemented in the reference framework of competencies in the *terminales*, is less evident in the *Socle*, where the gap between the two components has remained more pronounced, with two more “philosophical” axes (1. Building autonomous and critical thinking, 2. Knowing oneself and opening up to the other) and two more “citizen” axes (3. Building citizenship with equal rights and dignity, 4. Engaging in social and democratic life). Other notorious differences remain between the two reference-frameworks, raising the question of continuity. For example, the very practice of philosophy is different, since in the *Socle* philosophy is confined to the practice of philosophizing and thinking by oneself (in the line of the philosophy for children of M. Lipman or M. Tozzi), and then opens to the reading of texts of philosophers at the end of secondary school (where the competence “to read and understand a philosophical text” becomes omnipresent).

This difference in the practice of philosophy can be explained by the supposed immaturity of the students, but also by the training of the teachers: primary and early secondary school teachers have virtually no training in philosophy (just a very general philosophy course, a little epistemology, a course in neutrality). Whereas upper secondary school teachers are trained in philosophy beforehand, either because it is their basic training (a master’s degree in philosophy with a didactic orientation), or because they must follow a complementary training in philosophy (when they have a master’s degree in ethics, law, political science, anthropology, or social sciences). They are therefore *a priori* much better equipped to tackle the philosophical tradition. “A priori” because, in reality, the current situation, in the midst of transition, is a little different: the course is now given overwhelmingly by former teachers of morals or religion who are not always trained philosophers and who have received only limited training in philosophy and its didactics (a 30-credit certificate). Many of them therefore find themselves faced with an extremely demanding task: to teach a subject and an approach with which they are themselves becoming familiar, only in a hurry.

This task is made all the more difficult by the fact that the Belgian program for the competencies in the *terminales* (and I am now sticking to this level of teaching), Learning Acquisition Units (*Unités d’Acquis d’Apprentissage*, UAA), are entirely based on themes (Ethics and Technics, Discourse and the Pitfalls of Discourse, Truth and Power, The State: Why, How Far?, etc.). These are not developed anywhere; one can just cling to a list of knowledge (reduced to their simplest expression: concepts, sometimes currents of thought, without any further details), know-how, and attitudes, which one must then sort and arrange oneself to bring out a philosophical problem, find authors, a didactic framework, etc. Contrary to some countries, where a set of authors and doctrines is imposed, the teacher here is entirely free to compose his course, as long as it deals with the themes and concepts of the reference framework. But these themes and concepts are very numerous (far too numerous, in fact, for a one-hour course) and come from very different philosophical fields (showing here the diversity of the particular areas of expertise of the designers), or even from other disciplines, which

makes their appropriation very complex, and their didactic transposition necessarily perilous.

As for the approach proposed by the programs, it is not easy to identify it without solid training in philosophy. It is based more explicitly on methods of philosophy for children in primary school but then asks to “proceed by problematization and conceptualization.”⁶ The whole challenge of the course is to be able to get rid of one’s primary opinions (and not to express them spontaneously, as it is still sometimes believed) by questioning the type of coherence they mobilize, by pointing out the presuppositions they contain and the consequences they imply. Following this, the course of Philosophy and Citizenship “questions and analyzes the categories and conceptual oppositions that structure our ways of thinking. One should reflect upon and think about them rather than being thought about by them.”⁷ The philosophical concept itself always comes from this type of work on pre-established categories, in short from a critical work of problematization. The program thus maintains, in the footsteps of Gilles Deleuze, that the history of philosophy can only be understood if one can relate the concepts studied to the problems to which they respond, in a specific context that makes them necessary in some way.

The goal of this critical work is to arrive at autonomous thought, the exercise of which allows one “first, to understand the plurality of logics, ethics and politics that humanity is the bearer of; second, to acquire the means to judge and decide autonomously.”⁸ There is therefore a practical scope to the course, which is in line with its objective of forming citizens, not as an external end, but as an internal end to the very exercise of philosophizing, so much so that philosophy and citizenship are intimately intertwined.

To conclude this brief presentation of the Belgian Philosophy and Citizenship course, let us note some specificities that make it original and interesting. Belgian-style philosophy, taught from the first primary school level, all types of schools combined (general, technical, professional), is intended to be “philosophy for all”, and it contrasts with the more classical French conception of philosophy as the “crowning glory” of secondary school, requiring the prior acquisition of knowledge before being able to practice. Having integrated the contributions of the “new philosophical practices” (*Nouvelles pratiques philosophiques*), the philosophy course is conceived as a fair balance between the work of competences (thinking skills) and the transmission of a tradition, with its own corpus of knowledge; the emphasis placed on epistemology, logic, politics, ethics, automatically relegates other fields of philosophy (aesthetics, metaphysics, phenomenology, etc.) to a second place. Furthermore, the privileged place is given to current issues and to contemporary philosophers contrasts with the idea of philosophy turned towards the past, dusty, and out of step with our times; finally, integrating other disciplines such as sociology, law, anthropology, etc. into the course makes philosophy a discipline connected to “foreign subjects.”

As we can see, the Belgian legislator has been particularly ambitious in its conception of the course of Philosophy and Citizenship, extended over twelve years, with demanding programs. It is now a question of giving the means to achieve these ambitions, by granting two hours of

⁶ See note 4, p. 18.

⁷ See note 4, p. 18.

⁸ See note 4, p. 19.

classes per week to this new discipline, as is the demand by many teachers, and by offering to all those who implement it in the field a continued training, over the long term.