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Introduction

Manuscripts have played an important role in the educational practices of virtually all cultures that have made use of them. They have been instrumental in disseminating knowledge at all levels, ranging from elementary to the most sophisticated literary, philosophical, and religious forms of education, as well as conveying vocational knowledge. The use of manuscripts enabled the implementation of complex forms of teaching and learning practices in their quality of means for receiving, preserving, and transmitting knowledge, not only as repositories of information, but also as physical and intellectual spaces where contents could be summarised, expanded, and reshaped.

Therefore, manuscripts used in educational contexts can certainly be considered as primary witnesses for reconstructing and studying didactic and scholarly activities and methodologies, since they served as learning and teaching tools both for teachers and students. On the one hand, manuscripts can help us reach a broad understanding of the different and complex modes of education – more or less institutionalised as they may have been – that characterised different cultures from the moment in which they knew literacy, on the other, they also bear individual characteristics, which, in turn, allow us to investigate specific educational and learned practices. In general, manuscripts belonging to different cultures should not be studied merely from a genealogical perspective as models that would later be faithfully reproduced in each single detail, but rather as individual written artefacts resulting from personal adaptation and re-elaboration of knowledge. Thus, manuscripts offer evidence for reconstructing and interpreting the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they were produced and used. All in all, manuscripts may be considered to be mediators of educational practices that contribute to organising, structuring, and influencing the acquisition, organisation, and transmission of knowledge.

Conversely, manuscripts, as any archaeological finding, are but snapshots of concrete historical moments, the full picture of which can only be partially reconstructed. It is fair to say, many manuscripts that once might have been used in educational contexts may not have survived. Therefore, apart from the numerous reasons for this loss of written material, research on teaching and learning

practices should take into consideration not only what has survived, but what might also be lost. Similarly, although manuscripts provide invaluable evidence, they certainly do not tell the whole story. Hence, any reconstruction of concrete teaching and learning practices and educational contexts of the past must be accompanied by a study of additional historical sources, thus at best, manuscriptology, philology, and historical research go hand in hand.

At a more abstract level, a number of ‘polar tensions’ emerge when studying the role of manuscripts in education. First of all, the interaction between *oral* and *written* educational practices, which finds in manuscripts its locus of mediation. Furthermore, two oppositions appear particularly relevant when it comes to knowledge and its transmission, namely that of *stability* versus *instability*, which characterises the transmission of knowledge through space and time, and that of *standardisation* versus *individualisation*, which characterises both learning and teaching practices. These pairs of oppositions constantly intertwine, so much so that the negotiations of their reciprocal tensions deeply shape the material realisation of knowledge into manuscripts in terms of both their production and use. The current volume engages with these dynamics from a four-fold perspective that characterises its internal structure. The articles included here have been distributed over four sections, each of which is opened by a more detailed sub-introduction. Needless to say, although the articles focus mainly on one of the four topics, they all share contiguities.

1 Educational settings: Teachers, students, and their manuscripts (Stefanie Brinkmann)

Teaching and learning in the pre-modern period often involved a personal relationship between teacher and student, and their direct interactions at various locations. The scholar, or teacher, was the attachment figure, less so the institution itself. In many regions and periods, this partly led to a distinctive mobility of both students and scholars. Textual evidence in manuscripts, such as certificates or classroom notes, enables a (partial) identification of teachers, and a (partial) reconstruction of teacher-student relations. Additional information on places and dates renders possible a geo-spatial mapping of certain educational settings, from which the social networks of education may emerge. Annotations in the manuscripts, as well as the materiality of the manuscript, e.g., its form, visual organisation, and script, may permit conclusions to be drawn on the applied didactics, and the actual use of manuscripts in educational contexts.

2 Exegetical practices: Annotations and glossing (Stefano Valente)

Working on the material evidence of the intellectual engagement with texts incurs dealing with the practices of glossing, annotating, and commenting texts in written artefacts. Manuscripts preserving text(s) with an exegetical apparatus usually originate in educational and scholarly contexts. Annotations can bear traces of oral teaching and learning activity. They may also represent a more or less standardised exegetical corpus or be the product of fresh commentarial activity by a single person or a group. Different typologies of exegesis can be discovered: in many cases, a structured space had been planned in a manuscript to be used for hosting comments. In general, the manuscriptological and philological study of each single written artefact containing a text along with glosses and commentaries may lead to an uncovering of material, cultural, and social environments related to production and use; this may help in understanding and reconstructing teaching and learning practices and in assessing the institutions that used them.

3 Organising knowledge: Syllabi (Giovanni Ciotti)

The organisation and classification of knowledge are essential components of any educational tradition. Such activities manifest themselves in the production and circulation of texts, which can be transmitted orally, in written form, or both. Furthermore, educational practices are characterised by the ways in which texts and their selection, for instance, influence the production and use of manuscripts, as well as how the material aspects of manuscripts influence the possibility of manipulating knowledge and texts. This section of the volume outlines and exemplifies the principles of such an interaction by means of the following three categories: (a) syllabi, i.e., the more or less defined groups of subjects, (b) the texts relevant to teaching and studying those syllabi, and (c) the manuscripts containing those texts. Whether or not all three categories are overtly manifest in a given culture or can be reconstructed, it is clear the investigation of their interplay opens a new window onto the material and textual aspects of knowledge within virtually any educational setting that has made use of manuscripts.

4 Modifying tradition: Adaptations (Eva Wilden)

Different forms of adaptation and transformation mainly affect two opposite aspects of how knowledge is transmitted and reshaped. On the one hand, one meets with a wide range of choices aimed at enhancing and interpreting the core-content of a manuscript by correcting, annotating, and commenting it (also with the help of drawings and illustrations). On the other, one encounters the output of various processes of shortening and condensing knowledge in the form of excerpts from commentaries or other texts, their summaries, and the insertion into already existing or newly produced manuscripts in the form of annotations or autonomous texts. This has the potential of a reimagining of the core-content. Moreover, the trends toward a simplification of complex literary or religious traditions aiming at a broader audience should also count among those typologies of transformation. Translations from one language to another belong to this category, too. The general term ‘adaptation’ is employed in this volume when referring to transformations of the above-mentioned types that are planned and executed in an individual manuscript project, as opposed to a process of (re-)use.

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