

Towards the pedagogical excellence of higher education

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ABSTRACT:

In this article¹, higher education pedagogy is contextualised in the broader fields of the aims to be achieved, of the undertaken educational policies and the social demands made to this level of education. Special attention is given to the role of higher education in the construction of the knowledge society.

Some critical issues have been presented and briefly examined with reference to student-centred teaching, since the author regards this as the first step (though not the only one) towards achieving pedagogical excellence in higher education. If this is the main objective, then investment in the formal teacher training of university professors is necessary.

KEY WORDS:

Higher education pedagogy, Student centred learning, Adult learners, University teacher education.

The pedagogical excellence we advocate for higher education is that which does not dismiss: (i) the questioning of this very education without first questioning the means; (ii) the questioning of global, regional and national higher education and science policies, without questioning how these learning communities are organised in each institution, each course and in each curriculum subject; (iii) the questioning of what it expects (and does not expect) of higher education, without evaluating whether such requisition is being met or not.

Therefore, we do not sustain a strict conception of pedagogy, satisfied with focusing on teaching-learning-training processes as if they were developed in a closed circuit. Indeed, in order to question the higher education pedagogy, the latter should be viewed as a complex and multidimensional space on which a variety of expectations and influences focus and interweave, as suggested by Zabalza (2002, pp. 13-15) suggested, in his proposal that conceptual strands be considered in the analysis and definition of development perspectives: university policy; curriculum material/science and technology; teachers and their professional world; students and the world of labour to which they aspire.

HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Under the influence of globalization and from the perspective of the construction of knowledge societies

(the knowledge society?) there is no doubt that education, teaching and training, particularly on a higher level, have been the object of unprecedented interest which goes beyond national borders.

The three conceptions of university that are generally accepted – Liberal University, Research University and Service University— are being re-shaped: without any of them being the most dominant, solutions on the basis of commitment are being sought among perspectives inspired by each one, giving rise to more visible and severe contradictions than, perhaps, in other periods of the past.

- Most important instrument for sustaining the present and future development of societies
- Sustenance of personal survival and/or affirmation projects
- Guardian of the scientific and cultural heritage of humankind
- Business material – knowledge / merchandise that is sold and purchased which some believe should be regulated under the World Trade Organization
- Essential contribution to the humanization of human beings

These are some of the images (and realities) through which the network to which higher education currently belongs is woven. Different protagonists give different importance and priority to each one of these traits. Some of the protagonists — politicians, representatives of economic forces, academics with

high responsibilities in leading these institutions—even when they seem to converge momentarily, contradict each other at an early stage and vice-versa. Another essential part of the protagonists, the students, seem currently detached from or perplexed by the training proposals put to them: they primarily discuss the material conditions of access to training and hardly or never the scientific and pedagogical training profile given to them. It is hardly surprising then that education is defined and evolves with difficulties and hesitations in a scenario where there is an abundance of conflicts among perspectives. No one seems very sure of the targets to be achieved or of the best ways of accomplishing them.

THE PLACE OF HIGHER EDUCATION PEDAGOGY

Research geared towards higher education pedagogy has taken its time to develop. Goodlad (1995, quoted by Zabalza, 2002), on trying to synthesize the types of studies that had been more frequent up to that point, pointed out four main areas:

- Historical studies, focusing on the variable nature of institutions over time;
- Phenomenological studies on the specific contribution (to reproduce or modify) of universities to the construction of the societies to which they belong;
- Economically-oriented studies geared towards verifying the cost-benefit relation of higher education, both for the State and individuals;
- Impact studies with a view to verifying a change in knowledge and attitudes provided by university experience.

However, it is still interesting to see how pedagogical studies based on teaching and learning processes, perhaps due to their rarity, have not gained a classification along with their counterparts. Indeed, only from the 90s onwards did studies on higher education pedagogy begin to affirm themselves, due to their quantity and increasing quality. Interest in the university as “a space for formative decision-making”, to use the expression of Zabalza (2002), is, nevertheless, very recent.

QUESTIONING THE CONTENT OF EDUCATION

Talking about the pedagogy of higher education is, for us, talking about science through teaching and learning and of science on teaching and learning.

Let us briefly consider the first of these traits in the conviction that the first pillar of university pedagogy has to be the knowledge available to be taught and learned.

According to multiple evaluation reports, more often than not the knowledge made available to students is mainly, if not exclusively, constructed knowledge provided for and contained in the manuals. This type of knowledge is more available than the knowledge constructed through pertinent questions and the search for valid responses on the part of real learning communities made up of teachers and students which, really, all higher education institutions ought to be.

However, it is vital to acknowledge that society seems to be claiming two kinds of differentiated products: the training of merely executive staff who act in accordance with consecrated knowledge (which will inexorably become outdated over increasingly shorter periods of time) and the training of creative staff, capable of inventing new solutions for existing and possible future problems. The massification of higher education that has been witnessed in a number of societies has brought to light the first of these tendencies, while simultaneously increasingly more sophisticated and pressurising evaluation systems identify those which respond to the second above-mentioned requirements as excellence centres. It may be said that in current societies there is room for both kinds of training and, within the realm of higher education, what was formerly referred to as *ensino médio* [secondary or technical education] has to live alongside a type of “higher education” inspired by the best traditions of university education.

In spite of the complicated web in which higher education currently finds itself, in terms of the main aims to be met, and without forgetting the weight of the external entities involved and the pressure to which they are subject, we firmly believe that the higher education institutions should not give in to adopt a passive or merely reactive role on this matter.

They should affirm themselves as an important and pro-active part of the construction of the future.

It is from this perspective that we also place responsibility on the institutions for the increase in pedagogical quality. It is crucial to act so as to improve the curricula and processes of teachers and students, with a view to learning and training from within the system without waiting for general social and political constraints to determine them. As far as pedagogical issues are concerned, political power has restricted itself to discourse (albeit, inconsequential) on them. Take, for example, the mainly bureaucratic study carried out by the MCTES [Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education] on the registration processes of new Master and Undergraduate Degree courses under the Bologna Process —greater emphasis is given to whether the forms have been filled in correctly, in accordance with the criteria (debatable) of Central Administration, than to the scientific and pedagogical content of the proposals. An implicit and premature norm has triumphed, according to which all basic training would be two-phased (undergraduate degree+master), only making exceptions for cases where such an imposition would cause social alarm, by criteria we fear have been exclusively economically-based.

FOCUSING LEARNING/TRAINING ON THE STUDENT/LEARNER

In our opinion, this is an aim that is far from novel: several examples of this aspiration and its accomplishment may be found at a number of periods and in situations which are either further or closer to us in time, thus, the perplexed reaction when it was presented as the great plan for the present and future of higher education pedagogy.

In spite of what has just been said, we believe that this aim has been established on the basis of three reasons:

- Since there are still many situations where higher education pedagogy is teacher and material-centred;
- Since the context to which such aim belongs nowadays is more difficult and demanding than in past situations, even when successful;

- Since this aim encourages all those who are concerned with increasing and improving the resources lacking in higher education and which, as we know, have become increasingly scarce.

As far as the second aspect is concerned, it is fundamental to bear the massification of higher education in mind, which has already occurred in a number of countries and brought increasingly heterogeneous groups of students, in terms of their socio-economic and socio-cultural origins, personal and academic backgrounds and plans for the future to this level of education. Therefore, nowadays, when speaking about making the teaching-learning-training processes student-centred, one is speaking about an aim which is only connected to what occurred in past situations by the terms used: even though in name it is the same, it is currently more complex in its accomplishment, more difficult to achieve and a source of contradictions which need to be specified, discussed and overcome.

It is easy to recognise a variety of obstacles which might hinder the accomplishment of this aim, among which the following are included:

- The dominant academic culture and the conceptions of teachers and students regarding what it is to teach and learn in higher education;
- Each teacher having excessively large groups of students.

We will now go on to briefly refer to a set of issues we consider worthy of further research so that student-centred learning may effectively take place and the pedagogy of excellence be attained — in other words, so that student-centred learning may occur from a critical and not omissive perspective in terms of the contradictions that may also stem from an aim that is completely defensible at first sight.

QUESTION 1— HOW DO YOUNG ADULTS AND ADULTS LEARN AND TRAIN?

Since these are the main targets of higher education, one should not be too hasty in generalising certain characteristics that are habitually attributed to adults, namely:

- Knowing what they want from school;

- Having a relatively broad and rich cultural and experiential background;
- Knowing their direction in life and having a defined personal project;
- Completely mastering the decision-making skill;
- Being clear in terms of their specific professional interests.

The afore-mentioned increasing heterogeneity of university students is also conveyed in different approximation levels of the former to the above-mentioned characteristics.

Entwistle (2001, p. 8) referring to the empirical studies of Saljo (1979) and Marton and Saljo (1997) regarding the learning conceptions sustained by the students, points out the great diversity of conceptions among them which may be summed up in two broader categories: that of those who view learning as memorization and reproduction and those who regard it as the transformation of their knowledge and experience in accordance with the information and new ideas presented to them. On this basis, Entwistle suggests three possible ways of approaching learning and study on the part of students which he refers to as the superficial approach (passive reproduction), in-depth approach (active transformation) and strategic approach (reflective organization) to knowledge. These scenarios, understood as being successive, take time to construct over an academic period, even when the teachers invest in the accomplishment of more profound and reflected learning on the part of their students.

According to Zabalza (2002, p. 105) knowing how the young adults and adults learn and what the role of education (as the action of the teacher) may be are the most novel aspects for most higher education teachers. The same author is of the opinion that most higher education teachers have adopted a defensive attitude, considering “teaching” (their task) to be merely a question of commitment to the valid scientific knowledge in their area, and that “learning” is the exclusive problem of the student/learner, associated with his/her determination, motivations, skills, knowledge and previously acquired competencies.

Garrison and Archer (2002, p. 3) insist that *ideal* learning situations in higher education are those in which:

- All the learners have a life experience relevant to the learning task with which they are confronted and, thus, are capable of getting involved in a constructivist knowledge venture;
- The group is made up of what might be called a collaborative learning community;
- The learners are all capable of taking responsibility for their own learning;
- The learners have or may acquire critical thinking skills;
- The control of guidance in a learning situation is congruent with the educational targets and the learner’s skills;
- The learning situation includes an aim which gives substantial motivation to the students to run and manage their own learning — in other words, they have the incentive to determine themselves.

The authors underline the fact that in real situations we will only encounter more or less intense approximation levels to these characterising situation traits regarded as being ideal. The transactional perspective of teaching-learning that Garrison and Archer defend, which represents the connection among the six above-mentioned traits, is based on constructivism and collaboration, involves responsibility and control as main issues and is accomplished by means of stimulation processes or the emergence of the critical thinking of students and self directed learning.

For the afore-mentioned authors, learning is, thus, a meaningful construction process stemming from raw available information and personal knowledge yet to be confirmed, which involves a double process based on:

- i) The construction of personal meaning for the learner;
- ii) Social validation of this meaning.

Simultaneously, meaning is/should be personal and socially shared and validated so that the simple personal attribution of meaning does not conduct beliefs, implicit theories or erroneous representations.

QUESTION 2 — WHAT MEANING DOES “TEACHING” TAKE ON?

It is consensual, at least as far as discourses are concerned, that the simple passing on of information

is not the teachers' main task. Shavelson (1992, pp. 33-34), referring to the role of the teacher in the knowledge society, believes that it changes from "a distributor of information to an orchestrator of tasks which make reflected knowledge construction possible". Facilitating and sustaining the emergence of student skills so that they think in a critical manner, are able to determine themselves and continue to learn throughout life have been pointed out as the main tasks of teacher action. The difficulty (and controversy) is in how to go about accomplishing such intentions. The simple perspectives of innovation and technical inspiration that are often adopted do not attain these results since they fail to consider the global complexity of the training process, the training contexts and constraints. Using the isolated introduction of techniques regarded as being innovative (the use of portfolios, for example), or new devices (tutorial training spaces, *e-learning*), if it is detached or insufficiently anchored to an overall vision of training, to clear conceptions in terms of student learning targets and the role and influence of the teacher (the latter are, indeed, challenging and difficult issues), it may not bring significant improvement to the quality of training carried out. The congruence among intentions/activities/results— aspects which need to be considered through dynamic interaction— seems to be more important than the application of a specific technique viewed as being innovative. In fact, it is precisely in this last case that we have encountered many higher education teachers preoccupied with improving the kind of teaching they provide. We may say that training orders made on these terms should be the object of negotiation on the part of the trainers so that simplistic perspectives of the depth of change necessary and illusions regarding the ease with which they can be accomplished are not fuelled. This forces us to examine higher education curricula, from the general conception of a course to the specific conceptions in each of its subjects, to the ways the activities are accomplished and to how evaluation is carried out.

QUESTION 3 — CURRICULA: WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF LEARNING BY COMPETENCIES?
Some authors sustain that the subordination of learning to the acquisition and development of competencies represents a flagrant perspective based on

the coupling of higher education with the economic sphere and the demands of a new capitalist order that is typical of globalization. We feel that this consideration might be excessive as it all depends on the conception of the "competencies" adopted. They can be defined as knowledge in use, exclusively useful for economic production or, alternatively, define themselves simultaneously in the cultural, humanistic and economic use of knowledge. In the latter, we do not think it necessary to banish but rather to accomplish academic paths guided for/by competencies to be displayed by the students. When Leclercq (2001, pp. 31-32) suggests that they should be defined as competencies on leaving university education, (i) *specific subject competencies*, (ii) *de-multiplying or instrumental competencies*, (iii) *strategic or meta-cognitive competencies* and (iv) *dynamic or motivational competencies*, we believe that the second aforementioned scenario is being mentioned.

António Moreira (2005, p. 6) who has worked arduously on curriculum issues suggests that "the curriculum should be conceived as a contested territory, as a battle field in which different groups and agents fight for the officialization and prestige of their knowledge, meanings, skills, methods, beliefs and values": In coherence with this conception, Moreira suggests that the curriculum process in higher education should involve both the analysis of the idea components in the curriculum as well as the ideas that dispute space and prestige under the specific area curriculum of a given course.

- How have the characteristics of a curriculum been established in the university?
- What forms have been considered appropriate in order to discuss and construct it?
- What aspect(s) of the curriculum — aims, content, methods, evaluation, social relations — is (are) given priority in the selected conception and what effects does such emphasis cause to the curriculum renewal process?
- What influences (national and international) do the principles and criteria adopted reflect and what interests are at stake?
- How have discussions among curriculum experts been carried out and how can they come to be incorporated in decisions regarding higher education curricula?

Moreira poses just five sets of questions which we are picking up on here in order to exemplify the debate among academic communities in terms of sustaining more coherent and more strongly grounded pedagogical proposals.

These kinds of issues help stimulate a critical thinking scenario about pedagogy in academic communities. We also think it is pertinent to situate the tension between the contextualization and universalization of training. The movement of a pedagogy by competencies frequently seems to induce a possibly excessive contextualization of curriculum: contextualization in the present and in its immediate demands, hindering a vision of the near future; contextualization in the immediate social needs; contextualization in the current conditions of the institutions, without procuring a change of conditions regarded as being insufficient or deficient; contextualization in view of students' starting point, without raising the issue of modifying and improving this starting point.

Interpreted thus, contextualization may be, above all, inductive of conformist and not very ambitious pedagogical processes.

It is important, then, to question the "curriculum contextualization" concept used, the virtues it may contain, but, also, the risks and errors to which it might light, even unawares. Furthermore, if there is a time when the construction of universally valid knowledge and competencies is necessary, that time is now and, as far as we are concerned, will increasingly be time in the future.

Simultaneously, in the name of another concept, "curriculum flexibility", room has been made for increasingly important choices on the part of the students, on whom the content or subjects of their curriculum are based. It is also necessary to discuss whether or not a core curriculum should be safeguarded, as well as a healthy vote on the part of students which will enable them to broaden their interests. This core curriculum would identify a given training course and distinguish it from others, with the risk of some losing their sense of specialization completely and being little more than the sum

of sundry credit subjects and, at the limit, not even making sense in scientific and educational terms.

SYSTEMATIZING THE PEDAGOGICAL TRAINING OF TEACHERS

In Portugal, and where the pedagogical excellence of higher education depends on the specialized training of teachers, there is still a long way to go. Since the evaluation of higher education has been developed under the *Fundação das Universidades Portuguesas* [Portuguese University Foundation], school failure has become more easily identified and an increasing number of voices have claimed attention, innovative action and scientific study for the phenomena of pedagogy. Some innovative pedagogical intervention experiments have emerged, but are still far from involving the whole universe of people and institutions.

As far as we are concerned, the systematization of the pedagogical training of teachers we suggest is imperative in terms of institutional consecration, professional duty and the generalization of training for the entire teaching staff.

Having said this, we believe that the problems with which the learning and training of students in each course are confronted should be the basis of the training to be developed and not the creation of general training courses inspired by a defectological paradigm of teacher training. Instead of standardized courses for everyone, in view of the increase in the educational knowledge of teachers, we defend contextualized intervention/training programmes geared towards the resolution of pedagogical problems which stem from each specific situation.

The development of pedagogical training programmes, involving teachers of equal or related courses, from a variety of institutions (national and, possibly, international), the development of institutional and inter-institutional research-action projects and the consolidation of post-graduate courses in the field of higher education pedagogy may be important stimuli for the construction of pedagogical excellence in higher education.

ENDNOTES

1. Paper presented in the *IX Congresso da Sociedade Portuguesa de Ciências da Educação* [IX Congress of the Portuguese Society of Educational Sciences] (Funchal, April 2007).

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