PART 2

Curricula: Decolonised and Local

Education outside the Classroom: Social Commitment in University Education

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Abstract

This chapter is an administrative, academic, social and ethical analysis of the implications of articulating subject matter of academic programmes with the realities faced by the rural and popular areas of the department of Valle del Cauca (Colombia). Underlying this analysis is the belief that the purpose of education is to contribute to building fairer, more inclusive and democratic societies.

Keywords

social commitment – service learning – civic engagement

1 Introduction

Each university incorporates, within its mission statement, aspects of its own identity and the challenges faced by the region where it is located. Universidad Javeriana, as an educational institution of the Society of Jesus, is committed to a comprehensive education promoting faith and justice.

For instance, the Society of Jesus, states that educating for justice implies working in favor of the most universal good, prompting graduates, in the exercising of their professions, to participate in and contribute to the honorable government of public affairs. However, the segregating abyss of inequality prevents many people from confronting the complex realities that surround them and from being able to effect change. If we want to act justly, it is necessary to confront the realities of poverty and marginality (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2015, p. 21).

Therefore, the education process needs to create conditions that allow students and teachers to confront theoretical concepts with reality, establish personal relationships with different participants in the territory and be nourished

by experiences that value rights and that are based on human dignity. As noted by the General Curia of the Society of Jesus (2014):

Being a citizen implies reflecting on the complex problems that affect humanity, serving generously without receiving anything in return, disseminating knowledge that unmasks social prejudices and discrimination, taking part in public debates and influencing decision areas with rigor and commitment to the common good. (p. 25)

Moving forward towards an education that allows for the collective building of a society that seeks the common good and one based on social justice is a project that unites everyone. As the UNESCO states:

education is key to develop the skills that are needed to expand the opportunities that society needs to be able to live a meaningful and dignified life. A renewed vision of education should encompass critical thinking and independent judgment, as well as the ability to debate. (UNESCO, 2015, p. 33)

To achieve this type of education, and considering that the educational goals are determined by the pedagogical intentions declared in the curriculum, it is necessary to influence life at the university on a daily basis in the attitudes of teachers, managers and administrative staff of the university – in other words, it is the hidden curriculum that affects what happens on the campus and in the interrelations that take place there.

However, we are aware of the presence of an educational model that operates based on formal, academic knowledge, which responds to technocratic paradigms, typical of the so-called scientific disciplines, and where the university, in the words of Castro-Gómez (2009), is “conceived as an institution that establishes the boundaries between useful and useless knowledge, between *doxa* and *episteme*, between legitimate knowledge (i.e. which has ‘scientific validity’) and illegitimate knowledge” (p. 81).

From such conceptions of education, it is difficult to achieve the purposes of the pedagogical training of new generations so that they can respond to the complex problems we have as a society and as a planet. If we consider that the solution of such problems is an unavoidable responsibility of the university, alternative proposals of education need to be integrated in order to walk the path towards achieving such a purpose.

One solution is critical pedagogy, which understands that education is a path for social change, while conceiving that knowledge is an instrument of

liberation (Freire, 1989). From a Latin American perspective, Paulo Freire proposes education as necessary for humanisation, which implies an essential and radically political, ideological and value-related activity. The liberating model, proposed by Freire, is based on the principle that both educator and student have things to learn and teach simultaneously, where teaching has the role of being a problematic, critical and investigative activity, which aims to unveil the reality (González, 2007).

It is a great challenge to assume this type of an educational paradigm in higher education, due to the fact that the university remains anchored to a scientific and technocratic educational model. Within this context, the question that arises is about how to achieve an educational model that is based on the principles previously enunciated, and that also promotes the development of necessary competences to participate in the job market. More to the point, how do we achieve balance between academic credits geared towards, on the one hand, a disciplinary education and, on the other, towards solidarity and commitment with the development of a more just society?

These are questions that are definitely part of the daily considerations of higher education institutions interested in contributing not only to disciplinary training but also to the education of citizens committed to their social responsibilities. In this context, we want to share the experience of the Programa de Formación Javeriana para el Cambio Social y la Paz (Javeriana Training Program for Social Change and Peace, FORJA) with the intention of exchanging ideas about experiences of integrating disciplinary training, the source being the academic programmes, with ethical and social dimensions.

2 FORJA: An Educational Experience That Integrates the University Classroom with the Local Region

Strengthening the development of the social dimension in the student is a distinctive purpose of the education of the Society of Jesus. Consequently, the institutions affiliated to this society promote the application of active methodologies and invigorate transversal and institutional subjects, which are enriched with the humanistic perspective that is characteristic of the institutional identity.

Strengthening the social dimension in university education requires the combination of multiple strategies, which are permeated by the pedagogical intentions declared in each syllabus, the design of the curriculum and the teaching and learning methodologies that are implemented to achieve a process of meaningful education and reinforce the structure of the proposal of

comprehensive education declared in the institutional educational project. The National Ministry of Education, in its decree 1330 of 2019, and the National Accreditation Council both require that academic programmes in higher education articulate, in their pedagogical strategies, the realities and problems of the social environment in which they operate (Consejo Nacional de Acreditación, 2013, pp. 29–37).

In this context, Universidad Javeriana Cali, considered that it was necessary that all students should benefit from disciplinary subjects that implement experience-based pedagogies and guarantee a clear articulation of the academy with local and regional problems, with the aim of contributing to greater social justice. As a result, in 2017, the university created the FORJA programme as an institutional strategy that focuses its action on selected territories and declares the implementation of the Service Learning methodology (Busch, 2018; Mora & Torres, 2018).

Therefore,

through Service Learning, FORJA seeks to create opportunities to exchange knowledge between communities, teachers and students that generate transformation of the context as an expression of the university's social commitment with the region. Academic programs within the curriculum are linked with subject areas aimed at contributing to local and regional problem solving in a medium and long-term collaborative work perspective, associated with specific regions. (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali, 2018, p. 15)

The FORJA programme aims to

link academic knowledge with the realities of specific communities and strengthen the social dimension of the student, which is understood as the ability to interpret reality through the knowledge of and exchange with others, as co-responsible transformation partners in building social justice. (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali, 2019, pp. 5–8)

The achievement of these purposes is related with the development of three competences: knowledge of the self, critical thinking and project management, with different levels of achievement.

FORJA has been working in three territories of the Department of Valle del Cauca, Colombia:

1. The municipality of Buga and its rural area. Located in the centre of the Department of Valle del Cauca, and a two-hour drive from the city of Cali,

the rural area of the municipality of Buga is populated by small farmers who earn a livelihood by growing and selling coffee and other crops which provide for daily sustenance on one or two-hectare farms. In this area of the municipality, the internal armed conflict had a strong impact in terms of death and displacement among many of the families who lived there. After the government's negotiation with the armed groups, the families returned to their lives, accompanied by various governmental and non-governmental institutions. The university's academic programmes of Biology, Business Administration, Economics and Electronic Engineering work with these farmers and their families.

2. Pance, a rural area of the municipality of Cali. This area is located 10 minutes away from the urban area of the city. It has an extensive natural reserve area called Parque Nacional de los Farallones, and is part of the Western mountain range, one of the three mountain ranges that runs through the national territory (the other two mountain ranges are the Central and the Eastern). The area is rich in water and it supplies the city of Cali. This township is mainly populated by families who arrived at the beginning of the 20th century from the south of the country, in a process of colonisation of State land. The population is composed of daily laborers, who work as gardeners, security guards, and domestic employees in the city of Cali. FORJA, and the academic departments of Business Administration, Systems Engineering, Design of Visual Communication, Biology, Law, Nutrition, Visual Arts, Political Science and Accounting, work with the public education and health institutions, and with the environmental committee of the township, mainly on the conservation of the rivers, the flora and the fauna of this reserve.
3. Commune 18. The city of Cali is administratively divided in communes, each of which is composed of neighborhoods. Commune 18 is an extensive area located in the south-west of the city, populated since 1920 by miners who worked in the coal mines in this mountainous area of the city. Its population increased due to internal migration processes throughout the 20th century owing to economic reasons and due to displacement caused by the internal armed conflict (Ruiz, 2016). In these first two decades of the 21st century, the commune continued to grow due to different armed conflicts that continue to afflict the country. Currently, about 100,000 people live there, some of them in conditions of extreme poverty. The work done here by FORJA is with groups of children, young people, elderly people and community leaders, who live in the poorest area of the commune. It also works with one of the medical centres that the Municipal Health Secretariat has in the commune and with the National

Police, in one of the programs they carry out in the area with children and adolescents. The families that inhabit this area earn a livelihood through informal work; women mostly work as domestic employees, and men work as bricklayers, street vendors, recyclers, or in some cases, as drug dealers, in the micro drug-trafficking business. The academic programs of Medicine, Communication, Psychology, Architecture, Civil Engineering, Economics, Business Administration, Law, Nursing and Philosophy are working in this commune, addressing different problems related to health, unemployment, social fabric, leadership, social violence and the coexistence of the social groups that live there.

The proposal of working in regions is in accordance with the concept of regional peace as an instrument of public policy that focuses on regions, citizen participation and skill development among the local actors (Guarín, 2016). This approach recognises that solutions to inequality must be designed in relation with the characteristics of the regions, since there are no standard solutions and each territory requires individual consideration. Keeping in mind that there is no standard formula to solve problems, dialogues with citizens must be promoted to recognise needs, expectations and potential in benefit of the materialisation of public policies and a commitment to strengthen the population's capabilities.

Each of the academic programmes defines the route to articulate the pedagogical intentions and the methodological proposal of Service Learning declared in the FORJA programme connects the teachers in charge and generates the conditions for the adjustment of the syllabi based on what has been indicated. In order to advance the institutionalisation of this strategy, the process is streamlined and monitored by the director of each academic programme and department, and transversally, by the FORJA office of the Academic Vice-rectory.

The subject areas related to FORJA are of a disciplinary nature and part of the fundamental core of the academic programmes. The methodology involves the development of projects that students elaborate with the communities, taking into consideration a diagnosis of needs done with leaders and members of the community. A report of the results of the implementation of the project is delivered to the community and serves as input for the project of the next group of students, giving continuity to the work done by their peers. During this process, the teacher has a fundamental role, since they articulate the subject knowledge with the needs identified in the community. They must also display organisational and leadership skills to guide the development of the Service Learning project. Finally, they support and help strengthen an ethic

among students that takes into account respect for communities, their knowledge, traditions and ways of life.

In 2019, 1,178 students and 28 teachers from 19 academic programmes managed to integrate the FORJA Program proposal in the three territories; 14 alliances were made with community organisations, NGOs and the state.

It is important to emphasise that the process that has been carried out so far in the implementation of the FORJA Program within the university has involved recognising and addressing different challenges, which are described below.

2.1 *Academic-Administrative Structure*

The administrative and academic structure of the university is established following the model of subjects, classroom teaching and schedules, organised in a standardised curriculum whose management depends on programme and department directors. However, with FORJA, the academic programmes and departments must take into account that the subject is developed partly in the classroom and partly in the territories and that it is necessary to balance the dedication in both environments. Also, the availability of community members to work with students in the field cannot be regulated by the university, but has to be negotiated with the participants of each community, taking into account that the schedules assigned to the courses do not necessarily match the schedules of the communities. This implies dialogue, adjustment, negotiation, and reaching agreement with the communities, procedures that go beyond the standard handling of things and, in some cases, exceed regular working hours.

Another matter to consider has to do with the academic credits of the subjects that participate in FORJA, some of which do not fit the model of face-to-face work, autonomous work and assigned credits that the student dedicates to this type of subjects. This situation has required a process of review and adjustment in the academic committees of some of the programmes.

2.2 *Dialogue about Knowledge*

The implementation of the FORJA Program involves the presence of people and groups from the community involved in the academic process, along with teachers and students. However, recognition by some teachers and students of the pre-existing knowledge of the community and its relationship with the content addressed in the subject continues to be weak. The idea that the university possesses true knowledge, and that this disciplinary knowledge is the only useful source to solve community problems is still an issue. This model

of university is the one that predominates, sometimes, in the interactions that professors and students have with the community.

Appreciation of what communities know, taking into account their narratives, stories, anecdotes, traditions and customs, about different aspects of their life and reality, continues to meet some resistance. This is because such local knowledge and its status of truth is considered less reliable.

In spite of such resistance, it is interesting to note how students value the interaction and exchange with other actors to nurture their educational process, as indicated below:

The way to find the application of what we study outside of the classroom in the field is very enriching. You learn a lot since it is not only theoretical, but the knowledge is being applied in the work of each group to provide results to the community. In addition to this, not only do you learn from the teacher in charge of the course, but everyone is involved in the learning process, since each person adds their own grain of knowledge until they reach the explanations or answers for the unknowns. (Applied Microbiology student, 2019-2)

In the same way, another student of the Projects and Strategies of Communications course, in the period 2019-1, highlights what he learned with the community: "I think it brought me closer to a true exchange of knowledge, now I find it more spontaneous to recognise the knowledge of others, especially people with urban experiences different to mine".

This recognition of the community's knowledge by students demonstrates that they recognise the importance of dialogue about knowledge, exposing the student to new knowledge. This is what must be continued.

2.3 *Transdisciplinary Work*

Another challenge is uniting teachers from different fields to work on common projects that articulate the functions of teaching, research and service. This is necessary when working within different communities because the needs of these communities cannot be solved with projects that respond to the interests of a single discipline, whether it is Medicine, Architecture, Psychology, Economics or any other. The need to advance in a perspective of medium-term projects that can be developed through teaching and service and that have a transdisciplinary approach is urgent.

One of the difficulties that hinders such transdisciplinary projects is found within the university structure itself. It is organised by departments and faculties, making it difficult for teachers from different fields to meet. Teachers

meet to discuss the problems of their particular disciplines, but not those of other disciplines.

2.4 *Pedagogy*

The constant challenge for the FORJA Program, pedagogically speaking, is to integrate the model of Service Learning in lesson planning, in the project with the community and in assessment of learning. Therefore, it is necessary for these activities to be planned, reflected and permanently given meaning by the teacher, the students and the community itself, to obtain different types of learning, which could not be achieved in a conventional classroom. Below, some topics that are relevant in terms of reflection are mentioned:

- The disciplinary learning of the subject. The students articulate the disciplinary subjects and the contents of these subjects with the activities carried out in the community. This allows the student to reflect on the concepts in relation to the needs or problems that are being addressed in the territory. This level of reflection demands the student to go beyond repeating what the texts say.
- The pre-existing knowledge of the community about the problem that is being addressed. This reflection is very important because it helps to understand other dimensions of the problem (political, social, cultural, environmental, and economic), the ways the community addressed it and the different explanations it gives about the situation. It is important to emphasise here that reflection is aimed at recognising that the community and the academy have different explanations, without ranking them as superior or inferior.
- Social conditions of life within the community. This reflection is important because it is what allows the community to be understood from other social and cultural references related to its history, cultural practices, beliefs, migratory processes, and social organisation. This reflection is done together with the community and is aimed at students and teachers achieving historically oriented learning in a particular context and making a critical analysis of the different historical conditions, prevailing development models and forces that influence the continued existence of exclusion and injustice in the country.
- The competences demanded by community work. This reflection invites the student to analyse the type of competence that needs to be developed to work with the community. The student is invited to reflect on their attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes in relation to the different participants in the community. They also reflect on their communication strategies, group work and creativity. These reflections help students to be aware of the work

done with the community and what it requires on a personal and professional level.

3 Conclusion

Educating outside the classroom demands the creation of new educational models that promote experience-based learning and administrative flexibility. In such models, teachers are trained in active methodologies, teaching practices outside the classroom are valued as academic work, there is promotion of intellectual production that is constructed collaboratively with community leaders, and there is continuous reflection about the implications of the encounter between academia and community, just to mention a few aspects.

This effort, as presented here, is demanding, mainly because it requires more effort, time and a commitment that goes beyond the traditional work that students and professors are expected to do regularly at the university. However, the modest results that are achieved with each group of students, each teacher who is interested in engaging students with communities, and each community group that recognises the changes that occur in their region, are what encourage us to move forward with the FORJA Program.

There are many unsolved challenges and tasks, whose solutions are not written in any manual and depend entirely on what is done by the university together with the communities, NGOs and state organisations with which the programme is working. What has been corroborated in these three years of development of the FORJA Programme is that this type of a proposal really manages to strengthen the links of the academy with the most vulnerable social groups in the country in a dual sense; one, that the knowledge and academic skills of the university can help improve the living conditions of such groups; two, that the social realities of the most vulnerable social groups in the country impregnate the life of the university, impacting the educational proposal of the students and the academic processes that are developed in it.

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