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NEITHER “TEACHING-AND-LEARNING” NOR “LEARNING-AND-TEACHING”. THE REAL ISSUE IS “WHAT TEACHING FOR WHAT LEARNING”

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INTRODUCTION

Criticizing the teaching-and-learning approach

Much too often, teaching and learning are presented and discussed as if they were the two sides of the same coin. This approach is completely wrong:

- Most, and probably the more important part, of our learning is not the result of any teaching process: this goes from the learning of our mother language when we are a child to what we learn on our own, by studying and reading materials or at work by learning-by-doing, through what we learn from colleagues and friends.
- What matters for society is what people learn, not what they are taught.
- And, finally, the teaching-and-learning approach entails the danger of conceiving the learning process as something linear, which has a beginning and an end, while, in fact, the (good) learning process is in spiral: its broadening leads to a revision of what has been learned before and to an improvement/deepening/enhancement of it. This implies that the teacher must always remain a learner (a pretty obvious idea that too many teachers tend to forget)¹.

Putting the right question: what teaching for what learning

So, the right approach is not that of establishing a bi-univocal relation between teaching and learning (bi-univocal in the sense that a specific piece of learning corresponds to a specific piece of teaching and viceversa, which, as said, is not at all the case) but that of discussing **what teaching for what learning**: what learning can be facilitated by the teaching activity (learning something that, through teaching, can be better obtained and with a lesser use of productive resources than by other means).

When discussing this question, we should never forget a first element of answer that lies outside the purpose of this Brief: One of the main objectives of education (in all educational levels) is ideological indoctrination, be it considered positively (as an essential instrument of transmission of the main social values) or negatively (as an essential instrument for achieving the conservation of the existing social, economic and political order with its injustices and inequalities).

Whatever the answer to the question, a conclusion must be necessarily accepted: the role of the teacher is not (this is not a prescription but a fact) that of being a monopolistic provider of

¹ So, this goes much further than asserting the need for long-life-learning in the sense of acquiring new knowledge. It means that we never end up “fully knowing something”. And if someone objects saying that we “fully” know that “ $2+2 = 4$ ”, he or she should study a good text on the foundations of mathematical logic in order to discover that this is not true: we don’t know fully what is entailed by that identity.

knowledge; learners have a very wide of sources of knowledge at their disposal, which they use (and should use) all the time and that, very often, are more effective than any teaching.

It is much more helpful to look at the (good) teacher as a guider/helper/tutor that helps learners to acquire knowledge. In what follows, I'll use the terminology "teaching/teacher" and "learning/learners" when referring to the two respective generic activities; and I will use "lecturer/professor" and "student" when referring to roles in the standard HEIs institutional framework,

Reconsidering the Higher Education framework

This Brief concentrates on Higher Education (HE). So, what teaching for what learning in HE? To discuss this question, it is useful to begin with the traditional distinction of three main University functions: Teaching, Research and Community Service – or any similar concept, including in particular the transfer of knowledge outside the established teaching channel-. In this context, "teaching" means teaching in formal/institutionalized programmes; and "Community service" can include specific formative activities not included in formal programmes.

This discussion is usually muddled because some very essential facts are usually not considered:

- Many Universities (and HEIs in general) do not have the resources needed to carry out meaningful research (even less, research that aspires to reach "excellency").
- Many lecturers who are good at research are bad teachers; and, conversely, there can be HE lecturers who are good at teaching but who are not researchers.
- A HEI can be very good at transferring knowledge (serving the community that surrounds them) even if it is not a producer of new knowledge through research.
- Staff in HEIs (including in particular lecturers and researchers – and lecturers/researchers) are not necessarily of the best possible quality. A good number of the best graduates are attracted by professional opportunities outside the University and do not enter the academic career (in particular in the last decades and probably in the future). Therefore, we must discuss HE policy assuming that lecturers/researchers will, on average, not be "excellent"; they will be, at most, as in any profession, "normal". This consideration is extremely important in the context of the "teaching-and-learning" discussion but is not dealt with in most literature on HE. It strengthens the soundness of the view that, as lecturers are not the best world specialists in their disciplines, they should remain (but in actual fact do not look at themselves) as much learners as they are teachers.

This is why the first University function (teaching) can and must be studied in its own, recognizing its linkages with the other functions but without making it a dependent variable of them, in particular of the second - research-. This would change if the second function was restated, or redefined, as it should, as "Research and **Innovation**". Indeed, promoting innovation and an innovative spirit does not require the huge amount of resources that research (at least most areas of research) requires, while it certainly gives a purpose to teaching. Putting innovation at the center of HE activities is, furthermore, a very promising approach that would embrace the three traditional functions or missions of Universities (as the promotion of innovation is probably the best way to provide "Community service"). The discussion of this argument exceeds the scope of this Brief and deserves a Brief and an analysis on its own. This further analysis should cover the action of HEIs both at the domestic/national level and at the international one, and contribute to the empowering of Universities as development agents.

THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTION: THE FOCUS ON TEACHING, AND TEACHING FOR A DIPLOMA

Teaching for a diploma with professional effects

For centuries,² in, mainly, European continental Universities,

- **the focus has been on teaching, and the main actors have been the lecturers;** they decided what had to be learned (i.e. what they were teaching) and how (attending their lectures and studying their textbooks).
- And **courses (the teaching units)** were components of a **curriculum** that leads to an **academic diploma** that has **professional effects**.

The best examples of this approach are the organization of well consolidated diplomas leading to professional effects as they were organized when I studied in the second half of the 1960s in Spain. The situation was (and is) quite similar in most European Continental systems (and, I fear, in most African systems); and not so much in the Anglo-American, where there has been, historically, a much greater dissociation between academic diplomas and habilitation for professional activities.

- You were enrolled in something that made sense because it combined the academic diploma and the professional entitlement.
- This diploma was the object of appropriation by a corporation of academics that designed a curriculum and distributed it in components: the courses (these academics controlled also, in practice, State regulation of curricula when it existed). Courses made sense because, **put together**, they allowed you to get the diploma with professional effects: What would have been the meaning of the courses of Civil Law (I) or Criminal Law (I) if
 - o they were not followed by Civil Law (II), (III), (IV) or by Criminal Law (II)),
 - o and they were not a constituent of the diploma?

None whatsoever. The same argument applied to most other diplomas (from the different “Chemistries” (Organic, Inorganic, Analytical, etc) in Faculties of Chemistry, to the “Microeconomics I, II and III” and “Macroeconomics I, II and III” in the Faculties of Economics.

A very resilient conception

This conception came under question with the introduction of a distinction between “compulsory” courses and “optional” courses, a distinction contested by the academic corporation unless proved (or achieved) that the new combination of compulsory and optional courses guaranteed the same career (and income) outlets as the previous one.

The introduction of the credit system entails a further weakening of that conception as it made easier for courses to become not only the components of one diploma but components of different diplomas.

² Not so much when the Universities were born in the Middle Ages and their conception as “Universitates”, i.e. Communities of scholars, as well students as lecturers, was much closer to reality than in the XIXth and XXth centuries

The Bologna Process can and must be the subject of criticism, but it certainly struck a blow to this conception by,

- Emphasizing the distinction between competencies and skills / abilities (in whatever terms), a distinction that allows to question whether the competencies acquired in the different courses make sense in term of the abilities you acquire. A distinction that, in practice, was very well known by Law students in my time, for example. We were well aware that most of what we studied in the different courses of the Law curriculum (the competencies, in principle) was completely useless (and could be and was indeed very quickly forgotten because it didn't confer us any ability) besides allowing us to get the academic diploma with professional effects. On reflection after many years of different professional lives, we have discovered that the only really important thing we learned was not taught in any course: an understanding of "what is Law" and how it operates and, in particular, what (right, but also too many times wrong) use you can make of it.³
- And facilitating the dissociation between academic diplomas and "official" diplomas with professional effects.

However, the Bologna process, launched by some EU Member States and then extended to all of them and to countries outside the EU, has been merged, in practice, with the ECTS system, launched by the European Community (now the European Union – EU-) well before Bologna. As a result of the merger, the Bologna process has become, to the eyes of many, just "an accounting system". This is how a Secretary of Education in Spain defined me the Bologna Process a few years ago. And, much more importantly, this is how it is used by many HEIs officials and authorities. Further, experience shows that the professorial corporation is extremely well endowed to translate into different languages (courses/disciplines/credits) the same academic practices. A comparative study that still remains to be carried out could and should analyze the reforms introduced in the Bologna process framework from this perspective: how much real reform lies behind the formal changes in the organization (or better: the description) of the academic programmes?

Under this traditional, so resilient, approach, the credits (looked at from the students perspective) have the same meaning as the former courses on specific disciplines: allowing students to get a degree that enables them to enter the labour market. In actual fact, and disregarding what literature says on the topic, students continue "to view" (and live) as we view and live disciplines in the old times: as a number of teaching hours.

THE INNOVATIVE CONCEPTION: FOCUSING THE LEARNING PROCESS. WHAT TO LEARN (AND HOW) IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND HOW CAN A NEW APPROACH CONTRIBUTE TO GIVE AN ANSWER?

The need for a new approach

A completely new approach can and must be developed by focusing the learning process. It is **new** because it runs against the traditional approach centered into teaching that, even if it has

³ A bit like the definition of "culture" as what you keep after you have forgotten all what you have been taught.

been weakened and questioned, still prevails in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) because of the power exercised in them by the professorial corporation. So, it must be discussed much more from the perspective of a reform to be introduced than as something that can be studied from experience.

The new approach goes much further than most interpretations of the fashionable, and in principle welcomed, “student-centered” rhetoric, which still remains anchored on the “teaching-and-learning” approach (simply reversed as “learning-and-teaching” or “student-centered learning and teaching”). Just to begin with, the new approach must certainly distinguish between lecturers and students because these are two distinct social roles; but these two roles should become instruments of a **single** process and objective: that of learning (not only by students but also by lecturers). And even the distinction between lecturers and students could be questioned if one recalled the very old practice of using advanced/older students as tutors for younger ones, so that learners become teachers⁴.

The new approach takes as point of departure a very simple idea that, meaningfully, is absent of most literature on the topic: students do not learn because they are taught: they learn because (and if) they study: teaching is simply one of the instruments for their study. And students who learn more do so because, at equal levels of innate and developed intelligence, they work harder at studying the different materials at their disposal, whether provided by the lecturers or not. And the students who work harder, do so because they have a stronger motivation. If someone concludes from this argument that the best possible HE reform is the one that increases students’ motivation (and rigour and self-discipline), I would quite agree. In any case, increasing students’ motivation and rigorousness and self-discipline should remain an essential objective of any Higher Education reform.

Assuming that students remain normally enrolled in HEIs for a relatively long period (three to five years), the new approach has to give an answer to two questions:

- What should HE students learn during this rather long time-period?
- How, all along this time-period, must the lecturers’ activity be organized in order to contribute to this learning process?

What should HE students learn during this rather long period of time?

THE ECONOMIC/SOCIAL/POLITICAL FRAMEWORK:

Explicitly or implicitly, this question has a framework whose discussion lies outside the scope of this Brief but has to be mentioned. How must education, including HE,⁵ be analyzed from an economic and political point of view:

- as an investment, as it is assumed by the theory of human capital, to be minimized by reference to the expected return?⁶ or

⁴ The reader can find in Internet a nice very short piece on the history of this: <https://www.history.com/news/in-early-1800s-american-classrooms-students-governed-themselves>

⁵ Of course, the same discussion applies to health promotion-and-care and to most other domains where there is an active public policy,

⁶ As this is not the place for the discussion, I will simply raise the main question whose impossible answer undermines the whole argument of the human capital: what is the return and how do you measure it, considering in particular the huge amount of positive externalities generated by education?

- as an individual and collective item of consumption that certainly competes, in terms of allocation of resources, with other possible items of consumption, but that constitutes an end in itself, so that, in a period of economic growth, the drive for its extension and improvement is endless? This is the framework in which I place my analysis.

THE VERY DANGEROUS CONTRAST BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND LABOUR-MARKET REQUIREMENTS

In the discussion of that question, a contrast is established, quite often, between academic quality and labour-market/business requirements. Again, this Brief is not the place for a detailed discussion of it. However, some criticism of this approach is indispensable:

- First, it is usually based in a vision of education in terms of an investment to be minimized (a vision just already criticized).
- Second, it is based in a very narrow view of the labour-market and business requirements that does not take the standpoint of really good companies and public administrations, which know that what is needed for the day-to-day activity can be easily learned at work and what matters is the capacity to innovate (and, previous to this, to continuously learn and produce new knowledge).
- Third, and this is the really important criticism from the perspective of this note, it is based on a complete misunderstanding of what is “academic quality”, because as we shall see in what follows, it looks at it at from the (bad) lecturers’ very narrow perspective.

A PROBLEMATIC TENTATIVE AND VERY SIMPLE ANSWER ...

The right answer must necessarily be tentative and problematic for two reasons:

- First, it is very difficult to give an answer that applies to the extremely varied set of programmes taught in HEIs.
- Second, the answer must be adapted to very changing conditions both in terms of the surrounding environment for HE activities and of their internal organization (the vast effects of the generalization of the use of ITCs, as a main example).

With these two provisos, I think that some agreement can be found around the following four very simple ideas:

- 1. The level of knowledge in HE must be higher (or deeper, if you prefer) than that predominant in secondary education (which can certainly evolve and, let’s hope, improve).
- 2. The knowledge to be acquired by the students must combine some degree of generality and some degree of specificity.
- 3. And this combination is what allows graduates to both a) being able to apply in the work place the specific knowledge they have acquired and b) being versatile, adaptable to new labour demands, and innovative, because they have a relatively broad knowledge base.
- 4. But the acquisition of knowledge is not sufficient: students must metabolize the urge and the drive and the desire of keeping learning all along their life.

These are also the four characteristics that innovative firms and public administrations (the ones we must use as reference) request from the HE graduates they employ. Therefore, and once

again: academic quality and labour-market/business requirements coincide and are not opposed.

... BUT, SEEMINGLY, A REVOLUTIONARY ANSWER

But this is not what traditional academic organization, mainly in many continental European countries, is focused into:

- Characteristics 3 and 4 are simply left aside: the only thing that matters remains (whatever be said in the literature) what students learn in the courses.
- All courses are equally important: what matters is not whether they are “more general” or “more specific”: they are courses, all of them in the same footing. Students are meant to know everything about the content covered by the courses, an objective impossible to reach in a lifetime, much less in four or five years. The risk is that, instead of knowing everything of everything, the students end up not knowing well anything.

How should the lecturers’ activity be organized under this new approach?

Under the new approach, not all courses (in the sense of pre-organized units of teaching) play the same role and stand on the same footing:

- Some courses are meant to help students to acquire the specialized knowledge HE is meant to provide: other courses are meant to help students to acquire the broad basis of knowledge that HE must also provide and that will allow them to be versatile and open to new demands and paths of academic and personal development.
- Some courses will be more oriented to the acquisition of competencies; some other, to the acquisition of abilities.
- The length of the courses will also be very variable, depending on their content: one second’s thought suffices to discover very easily that, from a learning perspective, having to fit learning into predetermined units of standard length is completely absurd. **If it is not absurd is because, in actual practice, and as I have already pointed at, the courses duration does not depend so much of their objective and content but of the need to justify “the number of teaching hours” that lecturers must do in order to comply with the conditions of their contract or appointment.** This is an essential consideration, which is the ABC of the academic profession and of HEIs management and governance but which, again very meaningfully, is not present in standard literature on the topic. This is why I underline it.
- And, with some imagination coupled to practical University experience, more distinctions could be introduced.

CONCLUSION: NEW IDEAS ON CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING COMING FROM AFRICA

Prof. Charmaine Villet (Faculty of Education, University of Namibia) has contributed to the HAQAA Materials on Regional and Continental Integration in African Higher Education, a chapter on Curriculum, Teaching and Learning that brings to the debate extremely valuable ideas and summarizes some previous work by African experts. I refer the reader to it and will simply reproduce some of its content:

The curricula of most African universities continue to follow the traditional approach of accumulation of separate courses and credits, leading to a fragmented curriculum at the expense of a holistic, coherent programme. This curriculum approach is no longer able to meet the current demands of society which requires graduates to solve complex problems, using creative, innovative and ethical⁷ thought and practices.

...

This chapter argues for embracing a Transformation approach to curriculum thought and practice to attain the “Africa we want”. The question “Who will lead Africa into a bright future?” requires universities to reflect on the challenges facing the continent, and to define what kind of citizens will be able to handle the challenges most effectively. After all, in the words of Barnett (2017), the task of an adequate philosophy (approach) of higher education is not merely to understand the university or even to defend it but to change it. The chapter, therefore, proposes a transformation paradigm to effective qualitative change in African higher education that can lead to the sustainable transformation of this sector.

...

Historically, the Africanization of universities was part of a broad decolonisation movement at the beginning of the post-independence era in the 1960’s in Africa. Throughout the following decades, the concept of “Africanization” in higher education became tied to the notion of the regionalization of African higher education.

...

(But) the common conceptualization of Africanization remains elusive in AHE.

...

There are those who believe that African universities will be better served by focusing on their national, sub-regional and regional development needs and problems rather than to be stuck with an Africanization project. These scholars are of the opinion that Africanization is silent on the pertinent issue of transformative pedagogy that could effectively deliver courses that will develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions that African youth need for personal growth and social, political and economic development.

...

The proponents of the transformative approach to curriculum planning, development, implementation and evaluation posit that the most profound learning takes place when learners are actively involved in their own learning through experiential activities, projects and problem-solving. This way of learning encourages them to discover knowledge, co-create new knowledge/s, rather than simply absorb knowledge given to them by a teacher. It encourages exploration, self-discovery, learning by doing and leads to innovation that can bring about the social and economic betterment of society. As

⁷ Bringing Ethics into the discussion seems to me of paramount relevance...

African universities are called to play a more impactful role in their countries' social and economic struggles, there is a need to create graduates with the skills and attributes who can carry out the social and economic agendas. African higher education is thus in need to explicitly pronounce itself on which philosophical and ideological orientation will drive their transformation processes, and to give clear direction for their vision and mission implementation.

Indeed, it is great time to really listen to African voices instead of preaching to Africa ideas and thesis conceived in Europe or the United States, Canada or Australia whose value and effectiveness are very doubtful even in their country of origin. This seems a collective obligation in 2024, the African Union Year of Education.