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Insertion of Action-Research in the Context of Continued University Education

Michel Thiollent

This text discusses the use of participatory methodologies and, especially, action-research, in the context of continued university education at Brazilian universities. Guided by these methodologies, the continued education projects present investigative and formative aspects, and may take on participatory, critical, reflexive and emancipatory dimensions. This orientation is considered in the current framework of crises and changes in society and universities.

Key words: Action research, continued university education, participation

1. Introduction

After several decades of discussion on action-research and experiences in Brazil, it is observed that the trajectory of this trend in research follows routes that are sometimes contradictory, due to ideological or institutional obstacles, and new opportunities to apply it. It is also observed that the action-research that yesterday was known mainly by professionals in the field of education, social service, rural extension, is now widely disseminated in areas of social medicine, local and sustainable development, cooperatives and participatory management. Standing outside the official policies for scientific and technological policies, the supporting activities in social and solidary projects, both in the context of NGOs and in that of continued university education, have opened up new possibilities for the development of the participatory methodology in general, and the action-research methodology in particu-

lar. In this study we will present a few principles that guide the use of these methodologies in the specific context of continued university education.

In order to discuss the theoretical-methodological fundamentals of the practice of continued university education, this text presents aspects of a participatory proposal, according to which knowledge is not produced for immediate dissemination, as in the conventional research/continued education sequence. Both the research projects and those of continued education are seen as a social construction of knowledge, with the participation of differentiated actors. Aimed at fulfilling concrete objectives, such projects may be structured as action-research projects. Along this line, the methodology and work tools used have participatory, critical and reflexive dimensions, contributing to strengthen the emancipatory purpose of the university projects.

We are entering a new historical period, with predictable and unpredictable changes, open to a new hope for cultural life at the universities. Instead of being despised, as occurred in the last few years, public universities may come out of this stronger, and provide new contributions to teaching, research and continued education, mobilizing social objectives. In this new context, it is believed that the continued education projects will be increasingly important.

Considering this challenge, in the form of brief notes, we will discuss the following aspects:

- The production of knowledge and continued education as a social construction.
- The role of participatory methodology and action-research.
- The critical and reflexive dimensions.
- The design of an emancipatory purpose for continued education.

2. Social Construction

The current concept of production and dissemination of knowledge, which established a unilateral sequence between research and continued education, may be substituted very advantageously by a model of social construction of knowledge.

In the form of research, the “production of knowledge” is a construction that responds to different demands, and occurs with interaction between different agents, specialists, laboratories, academies, businesses, states, etc. Depending on the areas (hard sciences or social and human, basic or applied sciences) and on the interests that are at stake, the social arrangements to construct knowledge vary considerably, in terms of power, resources and commitments. This is clearly seen when projects are compared in areas as different as nuclear physics, oil engineering, administration, languages, social service, nursing, etc.

Continued education, in turn, is also a construction or (re) construction of knowledge, involving besides the university students, actors and publics with different cultures, interests and levels of education. The construction of continued education is not limited to the peers, it covers a great diversity of external publics, with whom interlocution must be established in order to identify problems, inform, train and propose solutions.

This assumption does not aim to de-characterize other concepts or other types of knowledge, with less visible or less immediate social return, it is simply a matter of establishing a firm option. In the areas in which the main objective is practice-oriented, this option establishes that continued education should not be seen as the simple dissemination of information for a public consisting of individualized, passive “recipients”.

In brief, the production/dissemination sequence is questionable, since to disseminate something, i.e., to perform continued education, it would first be necessary to have produced it. First produce and then disseminate what was produced in the laboratory: in many cases this leads to error, for several reasons:

- a) What is produced without considering the conditions of use, in general, is not very useful in practice, and will be buried in journals that have a small circulation.
- b) Fundamental knowledge, and a large part of the “products” of research in applied science are rarely applied. The logic of their development (with publications and fund-raising) is different from an extension activity based on the diagnosis of the needs of actors in real situations, permanently seeking support.

- c) The knowledge required for many continued education projects is shared among actors with different visions and skills, which would render the top-down transfer inoperative
- d) The knowledge required by continued education is co-constructed, and undergoes the close scrutiny of “reflection-in-action” (a concept of Donald Schön).

Taking this vision of social construction of knowledge into account, continued education projects will become more appropriate to the social transformation objectives.

Construction of knowledge occurs in each type of activity of the continued education projects: (a) in the diagnoses and research performed in communities or institutions; b) in the formative actions for members of those communities or institutions; (c) in formative actions for students, teachers and administrative-technicians at the university; (d) in the informative or mobilizing actions among broader publics; e) in the actions conceived and planned by the participants themselves, based on their identity and their situation.

3. Participation

Objectively, the social construction of knowledge presupposes interaction, and some kind of cooperation between various actors. Once this has been recognized, we may consider that the methodology of research and continued education acquires a participatory character, including on the subjective level. In daily life, participation may be implicit and explicit. With the methodology appropriate to the social context, it becomes necessary to have explicit participation.

Many people are still afraid of the participatory methodology, believing that with this adjective it would become less scientific or more exposed to manipulations.

After the advances of participatory research in the 1980s, in Brazil, a move backwards was observed in the academic field, but, on the other hand, the so-called “participatory methodologies” took up greater space beginning in the 1990s, in the fields of action of NGOs and international technical cooperation, where they are the object of systematization (Brose 2001). In the

framework of continued university education activities, the four Seminars on Methodology for Continued Education Projects (SEMPE-Seminários de Metodologia para Projetos de Extensão), organized between 1996 and 2001, revealed the interest of many university students in participatory methodology and action-research (Thiollet et al. 2000).

The participatory methodologies have become more applicable in the fields of education and organization, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon countries (McTaggart 1997). Moreover, they managed to be acknowledged in certain international agencies. In the latter context, teams of specialists deal participatorily with the stakeholders involved in social programs, rural, local or sustainable development plans, and in environment-oriented education and management.

Action-research is performed in an interlocution space where the actors involved participate in solving problems, with differentiated knowledge, proposing solutions and learning in action. In this space, researchers, people who work in continued education and consultants perform an articulating and facilitating role in contact with the people involved. Possible manipulations should remain under the control of methodology and ethics.

In an action-research process, according to Ernest Stringer, participation is more effective when:

- “It enables a significant level of development.
- It trains people in performing tasks.
- It provides support to people to learn how to act autonomously.
- It strengthens plans and activities that people are able to perform alone.
- It deals more directly with people than through representatives or agents” (Stringer 1999, 35).

Besides being a matter of interaction between people and groups involved in the project, the participation of groups from outside the university may also acquire political significance. This happens, for instance, when rural workers in a land reform settlement have the support of a university to study their problems of production and sales, in joint projects.

It is not enough to recognize the participatory dimension of the research and extension processes and the usefulness of a participatory methodology

constructed based on the systematization of interactive practices. The methodology we need should increasingly have other dimensions, associated in particular to criticism, reflexivity and emancipation. Sometimes these terms generate skepticism, because they were excessively used in rather inconsequent rhetoric, but it is worthwhile to reaffirm a new intention.

4. Critical Dimension

We see criticism as having three levels: that of ideas in general, that of daily life and that of professional practice.

a) Criticism of ideas

From the perspective of social change, in the continued education processes, the dissemination of critical ideas about current dogmas occupies an outstanding place. In the last few centuries, criticism of socially inadequate knowledge has gone through Marxism, phenomenology and other critical theories.

During the 19th century, Karl Marx was the master of criticism of law, Hegelian philosophy or classical political economics. During the 20th century, Antonio Gramsci provided an essential contribution to the criticism of knowledge established by the great intellectuals of his time. Beginning in the 1960s, Michel Foucault played an important role in the academic world to criticize, not only the general ideas, but those that impose themselves as norms in the institutions and their “micropowers”. Concurrently, Pierre Bourdieu contributed to demystifying the functions of teaching and cultural institutions, referring them to the processes of reproduction and social differentiation.

Nowadays, taking into account the legacy of centuries past, we must renew the critical capacity to demystify the intellectual “edifices” and unilateral visions that exist around globalization, the market, the new technologies and forms of power. There should be a criticism of the “noble” knowledge of economics or politics, and also criticism of “intermediate” knowledge, used in the areas of management, technology, education or communication, for instance.

But criticism on the level of ideas is not enough, it must be prolonged at the level of daily practices. It is the criticism of situations experienced at work, in schools, in the city, in the family, in daily life as a whole.

b) Criticism of common sense and daily life

At this level, criticism shows the implications of the prevailing representations or perceptions, and leads to a denunciation of the interests, the conflicts, the effects of discrimination, of domination, etc.

Common sense may be criticized based on the dialectical vision of history (Gramsci 1978), or reconstructed based on the intellectual changes known as “post-modernity”, analyzed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1996).

Besides clearing or denouncing situations of injustice, this type of criticism is also constructive, or propositive, generating ideas for possible changes, with democracy or direct participation of those involved themselves.

c) Criticism of professional practices

In their “unthought-of” part, many professional practices possess aspects of exclusion, as regards both the criteria of access to working in the profession, and the practical consequences on the users or those served by the professional services.

The role of teachers is not always as democratic as one thinks. The pedagogy that it adopts may, in some cases, be harmful to socially less favored students. Physicians contribute to the social reproduction of the inadequate ways of dealing with certain diseases. Engineers intervene in the production processes in a manner that often disqualifies the laborer’s work. The “scientificist” training of agronomists may lead them to ignore the wealth of knowledge and wisdom of farmers and natives which would be useful to ensure the sustainability of agriculture.

The criticisms formulated by groups of self-conscious professionals in their own practices is of essential importance. There are already examples in the areas of social service, medicine, agronomy/agroecology, statistics, human resources administration, and others.

In the projects that favor contact between the university students and populations or groups with a different culture, it is important to highlight the conditions of intercultural dialogue, limiting prejudices and the bias of perception to establish a critical inter-understanding, based on the language of the actors.

With, on the one hand, interdisciplinarity among university groups and, on the other, the intercultural dialogue with the external members, during the implementation of the project a space is created for interlocution where effects of understanding, of “translation”, of facilitation are produced, on the level of communication. According to the critical vision, all participants learn in contact with the others, accepting to relativize their points of view.

5. Reflexive Dimension

In the context of continued education, useful knowledges are inserted in educational, cultural, political, technical and professional practices, and make sense in the daily life of the people involved. They are never simply “transferred” or “applied”, they are not mere adaptations of instructions written in books or monopolized by conventional intellectuals.

Along Schön’s line (2000), it is possible to problematize the reflexivity of knowledge in the practice of continued education.

The reflexive effort on the practice by teachers, students and administrative staff involved in it presents several aspects:

- reflection in practice as a source of learning;
- reflection in action during the course of the project for an adequate orientation, correcting errors;
- reciprocally reflexive dialogue between teachers, students and users or groups to which it is addressed.

The reflexive project helps those to whom it is addressed to reflect on the action; thus they are incited to build their own knowledge. Good continued education projects are those that generate gains in knowledge and experience for all of the participants, based on the cycle relating action and reflection.

6. Emancipatory Purpose

Emancipation is the contrary of dependence, submission, estrangement, oppression, domination, lack of perspective. The term characterizes situations in which a person manages to act with autonomy, freedom, self-fulfillment, etc.

In the 19th century, the political and social emancipation of the slaves was certainly the most important change. In the 20th century, the emancipation of the working classes was marked by advances and steps backwards.

In the 21st century, which has just begun, emancipation presents itself as the most diffuse objective for all individuals or social groups that suffer some type of discrimination based on social status, race, gender.

Especially in a context of education, the search for emancipation concerns people who suffer the consequences of some type of social inequality. This search is implemented when people manage to overcome the obstacles connected to their status and attain higher levels of knowledge based on which they will be able to carry out challenging activities (in any specific area of action).

An educational action with an emancipatory purpose is a challenge to the laws of social reproduction, generating social change based on the fact that the less favored strata have access to education, not only access to the ongoing elitized knowledge, but above all a possibility of building new knowledge, in terms of contents, forms and uses. A same knowledge has different uses that depend on the referential contexts of class, fields of action and social milieus involved.

In the past, we were reluctant to use the term, out of fear of creating excessive expectation. In several of our continued education projects, in fact, not much should be expected as regards emancipation, due to the institutional and ideological limitations. An educational project is considered emancipatory, especially when it allows low-income groups to have access to knowledge that they would not have achieved otherwise.

As a psychosociological theme, emancipation may be furthered thanks to the study of social trajectories based on biographies or autobiographies of people who managed to avoid the social obstacles and enter broader cultural universes on their way to a higher education or high-prestige professional training. However, this is not just any kind of social ascension, because, in

certain cases, the ascension is of a conservative type and does not require an emancipatory culture, only the adherence to prevailing values and cleverness in a situation of competition with the others.

When a child is born in a farm field or in a shantytown, it is not very likely to become a physician, a teacher, a lawyer, a writer, a film director. Educational actions that could help in this sense would be of an emancipatory nature.

The relationship between biography and participatory research is a theme that has already been explicitly discussed by Henri Desroche (1990). Performing a participatory project is not an easy task and requires individual and social qualities that can be observed in the subject's biography. A clear capacity for leadership and a democratic relationship are required, offering everyone the ideal context of motivation and performance. On the other hand, well-managed participatory research and training processes have a significant effect on life trajectories of the people or groups to whom they are addressed.

Not all continued education projects are of the emancipatory type, but it is an ideal to be pursued, especially when it is continued education aimed at popular interests or at overcoming social barriers, as for instance in the case of cram courses for the university entrance examination, or programs to support creating cooperatives for the low income population. Emancipation represents a collective promotion that can be shared among the members of the popular classes.

An extension project may be considered emancipatory when the activities that are associated with it incite people to overcome the obstacles and limitations they encounter in their social, cultural or professional life. For instance, this happens in a continued education project that will help the population of poor youths and adults to advance in their formation, enabling access to secondary or higher education courses.

Emancipation can be thought of in terms of the trajectory of people who overcame obstacles of social destiny. For instance, children of a humble family who manage to study and, through their efforts, attain high levels of understanding or creation in given professional or cultural areas. The emancipation of groups occurs when the initiative can mobilize collectivities and reach broader results than the discovery of individual talents, in isolated cases.

Emancipation is different from “simple” social rise or promotion, because it is connected to a trajectory of overcoming obstacles, with participatory, critical and reflexive dimensions.

7. Conclusion

After a decade of liberalism, the public university is threatened, and many people have become discouraged, stopping their work on bold projects, and resigning themselves to fulfilling the demands of evaluation or survival.

In the current context of change, we must recover the bolder ideas, to face the challenges of the intellect and of daily life. The possibility of producing critical knowledge to be shared with social actors by means of continued education programs and projects is encouraging.

The methodology of continued education will have everything to gain if we reinforce its participatory, critical and emancipatory dimensions. However, nobody has a magic solution for this. It is built collectively based on existing experiences, with access to theoretical-methodological knowledge (particularly of the participatory type and in action-research). Furthermore, the technologies of information and communication have a positive role to play in this context.

There is still a long distance between the reality (sometimes mediocrity) of our continued education projects and the definition of this participatory, critical and emancipatory ideal. If this ideal is appropriate to the current (or future) context of social transformation, we will be able to suggest an effort of methodological training of the teachers and students in order to successfully carry out projects that are oriented to the appropriate perspective. The other aspects of sustaining the continued education policy (dedication, resources, enhancement) must also be thought about again.

Be as it may, in a context of really facing the great problems of society (education, health, hunger, jobs, family farming, environmental conservation, etc.), it appears that in coming years there will be new opportunities to experiment with participatory methods in continued university education (and also in other contexts).

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