Social, cultural, and institutional dimensions of higher education as contexts to understand non-traditional students[1]

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Consideración[3]

Abstract

This exploratory paper outlines some ideas and reflections about institutional and cultural perspectives, within the general context of the RANLHE project, developed during forty months, between January 2008 and April 2011 (Merrill & González-Monteagudo, 2010a & 2010b; González-Monteagudo, 2010a & 2010b). Although the main focus of our research is Non-traditional students (learning careers, identity, academic attainments, and so on), it is apparent that it is only possible to fully understand this topic if we pay a strong attention to economic, social, cultural and institutions factors related with students and their academic contexts (Jhonston, 2009).

From a theoretical viewpoint, institutional and cultural dimensions in HE (Higher Education) have usually been worked in Sociology (Sociology of knowledge, Sociology of institutions; Sociology of organizations; Sociology of networks, Sociology of Culture), Social Psychology, Cultural Anthropology (including ethnographic fieldwork) and educational research on HE. These trends of contemporary social research have changed over the last few decades, mixing its approaches, contents, methods and results (Giddens, 1984 and 2007; Kottak, 1997; González-Monteagudo, 1996).

In this presentation I refer to three different levels: macro, meso and micro. Macro level is related to economic, social and cultural structural factors, describing wider processes of social change. Meso level refers to the institutional level: traits of HE institutions, organizational dimensions of universities and faculties, leadership, power, academic tasks, and so on. Micro level

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refs to activities and processes developed within universities, in units of middle and small dimension such as Departments, teaching activities, research group, committees, and so on. The three levels are in reciprocal and permanent interaction. To understand HE in a complex and systemic way means to pay attention to these interactions between different levels, including the development of a sociocultural lens about students and drop-out (Quinn, 2004).

Key-words: Higher education, socialization, institutional analysis, sociology of universities, culture and learning.

Dimensiones institucionales y socioculturales de las universidades como contextos para comprender a los estudiantes con desventajas sociales y académicas

Resumen

Este artículo exploratorio presenta algunas ideas y reflexiones sobre las dimensiones institucionales y socioculturales de las universidades, dentro del contexto general del proyecto RANLHE, llevado a cabo a lo largo de cuarenta meses, entre enero de 2008 y abril de 2011 (Merrill y González-Monteagudo, 2010a y 2010b; González-Monteagudo, 2010a y 2010b). Aunque el foco principal de nuestra investigación han sido los estudiantes "no tradicionales" o en situación de desventaja (carreras de aprendizaje, identidades y rendimiento académico), es evidente que solo podremos comprender plenamente este tópico si prestamos especial atención a los factores económicos, socioculturales e institucionales relacionados con los estudiantes y sus contextos académicos (Jhonston, 2009).

Desde el punto de vista teórico, las dimensiones institucionales y sociocultu-rales en la enseñanza superior han sido habitualmente investigadas desde la perspectiva sociológica (sociología del conocimiento, de las instituciones, de las organizaciones, de las redes y de la cultura), la psicología social, la antropología cultural (incluyendo el trabajo de campo etnográfico) y la investigación pedagógica sobre la enseñanza superior. Estas corrientes de la investigación social contemporánea se han transformado de manera significativa en las últimas décadas, combinando sus enfoques, contenidos, métodos y resultados (Giddens, 1984 y 2007; Kottak, 1997; González-Monteagudo, 1996).

En este artículo hago alusión a tres niveles mutuamente relacionados que pueden dar cuenta de las dinámicas sociales y académicas en la enseñan-za superior: macro, meso y micro. El nivel macro está relacionado con los factores económicos, socioculturales y estructurales, mediante los cuales se describen y explican procesos sociales globales o generales. El nivel meso se refiere a la dimensión institucional: rasgos de las universidades, dimensiones organizativas de facultades y otros entes universitarios, lide-razgo, poder y tareas académicas. El nivel micro alude a las actividades y procesos desarrollados dentro del ámbito universitario, en unidades de tamaño mediano y pequeño, tales como los departamentos, las actividades

docentes, los grupos de investigación y los grupos gestores. Estos tres niveles están en permanente y cambiante interacción. Para comprender la enseñanza superior de una manera sistémica y compleja hemos de prestar atención a las interacciones entre los diferentes niveles, incluyendo el desarrollo de una mirada sociocultural sobre los estudiantes y el fenómeno del fracaso y abandono en la educación superior.

Palabras-clave: Educación superior, socialización, análisis institucional, sociología de las universidades, cultura y aprendizaje.

1. Economic, social, and cultural structural factors

Culture refers to norms, values, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, norms of conduct, and styles of language, assimilated, constructed and shared through social learning processes (Kottak, 1997). Culture in organizations is the set of shared beliefs, values, and assumptions that guide behaviour. New members learn the culture of their organization and their role in it during a period known as organizational socialization (Mendoza, 2004). Traditionally anthropologists had been more interested in that what unifies society and social groups, in shared traits. Thus Cultural Anthropology has insisted in commonalities and similarities among individuals and groups. From a different origin and perspective, Sociology has focused more on social differences and inequalities, stressing the importance of making part of different collectives or groups (in function of social class, family background, gender, place of residence, ethnic characteristics, age and generation) to establish differences and explain social inequalities.

Culture consists of two related yet different dimensions (Kottak, 1997):

• Material dimension: material processes related to social activities, located in a specific time and space; it implies the use and manipulation of specific artefacts related, in the case of HE institutions, to knowledge, teaching and research.

• Symbolic, mental and cognitive dimension: social and individual processes of understanding, interpretation; symbolic dimension of culture is related to values, norms, beliefs, religions, philosophies and ideologies (this is the level of the superstructure proposed by K. Marx).

Nowadays culture is characterized by an accelerated process of change; like in other sectors, university culture suffers the impacts of important factors which transform institutions, groups, individuals, and traditional habits of thinking and behaviour, legitimated over time (Castells, 2003; Giddens, 2007):

• Economic globalization and new systems of management.

• Transformation of the Nation-state and forms of political and citizen participation.

• ITC.

• Migrations, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.

• Changing gender relations and the progressive crisis of patriarchy.

• Scientific and technological advances.

All these factors are impacting upon HE institutions as well as being affected by the work developed in universities. It is a dialectical and complex process. Universities are being changed as a result of social transformations and also universities are influencing these processes as key institutions charged of the creation and diffusion of knowledge and research. It is important to study how different institutions respond in diverse ways to social and cultural shared settings.

Prevailing social and cultural forms of socialization have a strong impact upon the socialization of academics. The functions and tasks of the universities, within a globalized and changing context, have been redefined in a contradictory way, under the influence of diverse and opposed political, economic, administrative, institutional and professional discourses.

The impact of ICT is transforming and redefining university teaching. Traditional communication between students and lecturers has been altered and it is complemented by new forms, and formats. Teaching programmes developed via digital platforms are growing. Conventional teaching programmes also have changed as a result of new technologies. In this context, attitudes towards lifelong learning are also changing dramatically.

Economic structural factors sometimes tend to be marginalized, emphasizing the role of institutional and cultural factors. Nevertheless it is necessary to pay more attention to economic factors, which influence academic success, completion and dropout. The family income available, the national and regional economic structure, the labour market and the possibilities of employment are important traits. The current economic crisis seems to have a double and paradoxical influence on university studies. On the one hand, degrees are not considered as a necessary requirement to access to employment or to progress in the labour market. In the current context of high unemployment, degrees are not a guarantee to access to the labour market and to stay in it (Quinn, 2004, 68, for example, refers to the decline of traditional industries, the limitation of working opportunities and the lack of an apparent transition from the university degree to the local labour market). On the other hand, the increasing of unemployment and the decreasing of possibilities for accessing to a job by young people are raising the interest towards HE as a path to improve employability and a useful resource while the economic situation makes better.

The impact of social class in relation to university students (learning careers, identity, drop-out, specific difficulties, institutional habitus) remains in many occasions hidden. The social class is considered as an important dimension to analyze primary and secondary teaching. Nevertheless, in HE class tend to be ignored or marginalized as a perspective of analysis. Many academics do not perceive the social class as an important issue. It is supposed that, after having accessed the university, there is equality among students, regardless their social or family backgrounds. In this case, there only seem have an interest towards the fact that students with less economic resources have available grants and financial support. This issue seems to be very relevant for our project (on class and class debates, see: Crompton, 2008).

Different national contexts have general traits, which influence upon HE. Some of these traits are:

- Contemporary and recent history.
- Features and backgrounds of the prevailing political system.
- Shared values (i.e.: visions on effort and perseverance, an important dimension of the academic success).
- Use of time, including its implications in relation to yearly cycles of holidays, work, and school timetables.
- Styles, traditions and socially legitimated ways of socialization, education and family values about children and young.
- Self-perception of society and groups; stories, narratives, myths, which have been legitimated in different ways.
- Traditions, feasts and celebrations.
- Educational policy, laws and norms on education sector.
- Social, economic and cultural profile of the local communities in which are located university institutions.
- Groups and associations active in the social arena: political parties, trade unions, religious groups, and media.
- Companies and the private economic

sector.

- Position of the HE institutions in relation to the public/state and private sectors, including the funding of HE institutions and of the tuition fees.

2. Institutional, organizational, and cultural factors in higher education

2.1. Economy and Market

There exists a strong pressure upon HE institutions to produce more, to be profitable and to compete. Accountability, quality and evaluation are some of the words which show this new reality across Europe. This pressure, based on new ways of management and control, is transforming the processes of research and teaching, as well as the dynamics of faculties and departments, and the professional careers of academics, researchers and lecturers (see for example the *Research Assessment Exercise*). In this context it is interesting to recover the term of *greedy institutions*, coined by Coser in 1974 (cit. in Wright et al, 2004) to refer to organizations that establish high demands on their employees (here is it important the time dimension: academics tend to work more than previously; around 60 hours a week).

2.2. Socialization

Socialization has usually been approached from three perspectives: functionalist, interpretive and critical (this part about the three perspectives basically comes from González-Monteagudo, 1996, and it is based on: Lacey, 1993; Zeichner, 1979). Initially socialization had been treated from a functionalist viewpoint, following the Durkheim's and Comte's French positivism. Important concepts in this approach are status quo, social order, consensus and social integration. Functionalism is realist, positivist, determinist and nomotetic. Socialization is based on a consensual and static conception of so-

ciety. According to Merton (cit. in Mendoza, 2008), during socialization process individual acquire the values, attitudes, norms knowledge and skills needed to exist in a given organization. Functionalism does not pay attention to the importance of different social subgroup nor to differences of class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. Functionalism posits that the diverse professional subcultures are all homogeneous and uniforms.

The interpretive approach of socialization is antipositivist, nominalist, voluntarist and ideographic. Symbolic interactionism has largely contributed to this approach, particularly H. S. Becker, with his pioneering study of medicine students. Socialization is understood as a process over the whole life and career. There are stressed the subjective meanings of the participants. In Lacey's study (1993), teachers manifested two main orientations or types of commitment: a radical commitment and a professional engagement (here we can think about the connections between professional life, on one hand, and personal/ideological life, on the other hand). The active role of individuals is theorized through the concept of social strategy: the activity of the social actor referred to the selection of ideas and actions and the undertaking of complex interactions in a specific situation. There are three kind of social strategies: a) internalized adjustment (acceptance and fulfilment of norms); strategic obedience (external respect but inner discrepancy); and strategic redefinition (searching for new solutions, according to own interests and expectations).

The critical approach of socialization stems from the Marxism and the Frankfurt school. The focus is placed in concepts such as totality, consciousness, alienation, ideology and criticism. An important goal of this approach is to explicit activities and processes which are usually taken for granted. The critical perspective pays special attention to power relations and to inequalities as a result of the institutional functioning. Also there is interest towards

conflicts and strategies of resistance by groups and individuals. Socialization is understood as contradictory, dialectical, collective and individual. To understand socialization processes it is indispensable to analyze and criticize institutional, historical, social and cultural contexts.

Using the concept of socialization it is possible to grasp the complexity and interplays of macro, meso and micro levels indicated before, in relation to academics and lecturers. In the interactive level, lecturers contribute to construct the learning identity of students, and conversely students configure identity of academics. The colleagues are important because with them it is constructed a subculture of teaching.

Socialization process occurs both formally and informally. There is an anticipatory socialization (mediated by expectations, ideas and previous knowledge), which influences the initial entry into the organization and the different stages through the career as a member of the organization (Mendoza, 2004).

Weick (cit. in Mendoza, 2004) identifies several vocabularies as forms of exchanges and communications in organizations: ideologies (shared values, beliefs and norms that bind people together); traditions (vocabularies of predecessors: patterns, beliefs or images of action transmitted at least for three generations); stories (vocabularies of sequence and experience; stories serve as a means for members to express their knowledge, understanding and commitment to the organization).

2.3. Knowledge, Disciplines, and Teaching Cultures

We need to question the kind of knowledge produced and transmitted in HE contexts. The political, ideological and epistemological criticism of knowledge is a challenge that we have in front of us when we undertake research in universities (this section is based on Murphy & Fleming, 2000; see also Giddens, 2007). Marxists,

feminists, and postmodernists have strongly questioned academic knowledge (monopoly of truth, lack of relevance, lack of contact with the reality, reproduction of social inequalities). Scientific and academic knowledge (usually known as college knowledge) has been historically a product of males, but with consequences for women and their identities. Murphy & Fleming (2000) indicates that adult education can be understood as an educational paradigm opposed to Higher Education. While adult education has promoted experiential learning, common knowledge and subjectivity, HE has mainly based on reason, truth and objectivity. According to these authors, adult education approaches and the postmodernist turn are useful perspectives to challenge and question the authoritarian way of producing and teaching of HE institutions.

Alheit (n/d) has applied the distinction (proposed by Becher; see Becher & Trowler, 2001) between hard and soft disciplines, and between pure and applied disciplines to research the different habitus related to different university degrees. Alheit's proposal is useful to avoid an individualistic approach about academics and their role in relation to teaching, research and knowledge. Natural sciences (Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics) are pure and hard disciplines, guided by the ideal of the casual explanation (exclusive habitus). Classical sciences and Humanities (History, Philosophy, and Literature) are pure and soft disciplines, orientated by understanding and interpretation (habitus ambivalent). Technical sciences (Engineering) are hard and applied; here the goal is the development and application of techniques and products (pragmatic habitus). Finally, applied Social sciences (Social work, Education) are soft and applied; the aim is the professional practice in interactive contexts (inclusive habitus). For a discussion on habitus and its sociological implications in relation to identity, organizations and professions, see Dubar, 2004).

The classroom is a physical and psychosocial setting. The classroom culture consists of these elements: space, participants, social organization, intentional content (educational goals, academic contents, learning activities), and beliefs and thinking systems.

Individuals and groups through reciprocal interaction construct contexts. Contexts refer to that what people are doing, when they are doing it, and how do they are doing it. Each institution creates over time a specific culture, constituted by implicit beliefs, representations, traditions, rites and symbols.

The systemic conception of institutions includes micropolitical aspects. Institutions are impregnated of values, interests and motivations. It is important to pay attention to the diversity of goals, ideological struggles, conflicts, power relations and political activities.

The culture of educational institutions is influenced by demands coming from the social context. In dynamic, complex and democratic societies, educational institutions are characterized by: expansion of their roles, interest towards quality, participatory management, frequent changes, tolerance in respect of diversity, democratization in the process of taking decisions, capacity of decision in activities and behaviours, and establishment of relations with the social setting that surround them. On the other perspective, educational institutions become more regulated, controlled externally and bureaucratic. Both contradictory tendencies are an important trait of modernity, according to Max Weber and other scholars. This dilemmatic dimension of modern institutions is unavoidable. Many conflicts in organizations come from pressure about opposed traits: diversity versus uniformity, co-ordination versus flexibility, external dependency versus autonomy, contact versus isolation, and change versus stability.

Teaching culture alludes to a set of shared knowledges, with implicit and taken for granted contents, which functions as a collective model and a perspective to cope with everyday activities.

There are several teaching cultures: individualism (isolation of academics and lecturers; development of an independent practice, not submitted to criticism); *balcanization* (different subgroups which share common interests within each subgroup); collaborative culture (trust and mutual help; friendly relationships, shared values, acceptance of disagreements); artificial collegiality (formal and bureaucratic means). A positive teaching culture is enhanced through meetings with chairs of the departments, opportunities for team teaching, frequent discussions of pedagogical issues, induction sessions devoted to new entrants, and peer observation (Wright et al., 2004).

Socialization in the gender role is an important aspect of institutions. The landscape is changing dramatically, but women still have lower academic and professional positions in HE in relation to men, and also there are differences between male and female students in relation to social status and labour opportunities of the different degrees. In the study by Becher and Trowler (2001) were interviewed 221 academics selected from elite universities; only 21 of them were women. In the RANLHE project it will be interesting to analyze from a gendered viewpoint the management of HE institutions in the top levels of the organization, as well as the opinions of policy-makers and senior managers.

2.4. Organizations

Universities are organizations based on professional bureaucracies (Minzberg, cit. in Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot & Merrill, 1999). The tasks of the universities are complex, uncertain, and problematic. Universities share these features: professional culture (demands for autonomy, based on academic freedom and control by peers; divided loyalty towards colleagues and the local community; division of labour,

with strong specialization and multiple disciplines; co-ordination of work); professional power; fragmentation in function of diverse disciplines and fields of expertise; and progressive interference and control by top managers and administrators on lecturers and researchers. From a structural-functionalist approach (based on Bourdieu's publications), universities are structured according to two principles of legitimation: the scientific principle and the academic principle.

The political model considers the organization as a system of conflictive and interdependent alliances, striving to impose their own preferences and interests on the system considered globally (this section is based on Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot & Merrill, 1999).

2.5. Leadership
(based on Ball, 1987)

Leadership is an important dimension of university institutions. There are different leadership styles: interpersonal style (active and visible manager); administrative style (control of the organization derived from the business management); political-antagonist style (based on conversation and dialogue; it adopts open forms and it considers legitimate the political perspective of discussion and confrontation); political-authoritarian style (the political process is considered as illegitimate and it remains hidden; imposition of the own viewpoints). These different styles can be useful as a lens to better understand policy-makers and senior managers in HE.

It is important to stress structural and cultural factors (class, gender, ethnicity, generation), which influence the student identity and the construction of a learning career. The differences of social and cultural capitals between students and HE institutions can hinder the social and academic integration by students and consequently their academic success. It is needed to pay more attention to the wider social, cultural and institutional structures if we want to address the problem of dropout, mixing structural and agentic approaches to better grasp the complex nuances related to Non-traditional students.

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importantes los procesos de evaluación de los estudiantes que se encuentran en el último año de formación tecnológica o profesional, dado que los resultados obtenidos en el hoy Examen Saber Pro (antes ECAES) constituyen un referente para determinar en qué forma y hasta qué punto la institución educativa ha cumplido con su función de transmisión del conocimiento. Los resultados de estas pruebas, además, permiten determinar si el plan de estudios es pertinente a los requerimientos actuales o si se hace necesario adelantar procesos de actualización docente.

Los procesos de autoevaluación con miras a la obtención de mejores estándares de calidad no sólo deben fijar su mirada única en los lineamientos, orientaciones y guías que otorga el gobierno, sino que también debe tener en cuenta aspectos cómo el papel del docente, lineamientos e indicadores de las propias instituciones y demás herramientas que el medio le ofrece para el ejercicio académico. De esta manera los procesos de autoevaluación serán procesos que conlleven a mejoras integrales buscando siempre el mejoramiento continuo y mejores niveles de calidad en todo el quehacer de las instituciones y sus programas académicos.

No cabe duda que la educación actual debe responder a necesidades de tipo global. Ya no basta con conocer sobre las condiciones del contexto inmediato, puesto que las exigencias a escala profesional trascienden el plano de las distancias de tipo geográfico, porque los actuales profesionales o tecnólogos deben desarrollar habilidades que les permitan hacer uso de la información que tienen, transformarla y adelantar acciones que les permitan el logro y apropiación de nuevos conocimientos que suplan necesidades del ambiente en donde se desarrollen sus actividades profesionales.

Las tecnologías de información y comunicaciones constituyen hoy por hoy una herramienta de gran importancia al momento de mejorar la forma como se desarrolla la educación en las IES, porque permite trascender a situaciones donde no hay limitaciones de espacio o tiempo, donde las formas de captar el conocimiento se hacen de forma más inmediata y en las que se logra la interacción simultánea con actores que no necesariamente formen parte del contexto académico, pero que pueden hacer aportes de importancia en el ejercicio de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

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