3

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA

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Introduction

This chapter explores the contribution of Service-Learning (SL) to the democratic and social commitment mission of Higher Education (HE). It is based on the experience of the Latin American Center for Service-Learning (CLAYSS-Argentina), which has been promoting this pedagogy for more than two decades. Its purpose being to strengthen the development of democratic culture and active citizenship. The following topics are discussed in the context of higher education and social engagement: (a) building a democratic culture; b) a model to (re)build; (c) Service-Learning (SL) for active citizenship; d) strengthening citizenship and democratic culture.

a) Higher education and social engagement: building a democratic culture

Democracy - understood as a system of government and a way of being in the polis - is increasingly taken as the thermometer to measure and evaluate the development of societies. In this context, the term 'democratic culture' designates the set of attitudes and behaviors expected of citizens so that institutions and laws work in reality. It is a relevant conceptual evolution of the old perceptions of democracy that focused on institutions, laws and formal procedures, highlighting the citizens' active role in its construction (Bergan, Gallagher & Harkavy, 2015). Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) work within democratic regimes that have a serious deficit in representativeness, with individuals and social groups having no belief in their potential contributions to solve or mitigate social problems (BID, 2021). In broad terms, democracies have developed through two models (Quiroga, 2000): procedural democracy, exemplified in 'the exercise of the vote'; and

substantive democracy, exemplified in the active participation of citizens in social, political, and economic processes (active citizenship).

Like other regions, Latin America and the Caribbean face important challenges, such as the fragility of democratic institutions and growing social and economic inequality. After the 'return to democracy' of the 1980s, different countries have faced the challenge of re-waving and re-producing the components involved in the social fabric. A great challenge for our societies is the construction of the associative networks that link different participants and institutions (e.g., HEIs with Civil Society Organisations) and the development of the active role of citizens. The CLAYSS promotion of Service-Learning pedagogy in education systems is found at the intersection of HE, the construction of democratic culture, and civic participation. In this setting, the conception of solidarity seeks to transform social issues collectively, moving away from paternalistic (unidirectional) models of intervention. Consequently, specific pedagogies have been developed to implement the calls made by numerous international organizations and conferences on the need for HE to practice social engagement for democratic life.

Democratic cultures are not built once and for all; on the contrary, they are processes developed in specific contexts that show progress and challenges: "The global higher education gross enrolment ratio increased from 19% to 38% (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020)." While these figures show progress in HEIs, for example, because of national policy support, issues of equity, quality and institutional performance remain critical (Peregalli et al. 2014; Peregalli & Etchevers, 2015; Peregalli & Goméz Caride, 2020). It is a major challenge to have access to, remain in, and graduate from high quality Higher Education, especially for those in the most disadvantaged sectors in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the Regional Conference on Higher Education in 2018 (CRES), the average gross enrolment rate in the region for the period 2000-2013 rose to 43% (SITEAL, 2019:2). In 2015, tertiary education enrolment was almost 24 million students. However, only about half of those students between

the ages of 25 and 29 got a degree or diploma and almost the same number had dropped out or changed course by the end of their first year.

Although there is a major awareness of the relevance of HE for human development, the unequal distribution of educational opportunities is attracting sustained international attention, since it is an impediment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Universal access to HE is Target 4.3, of Goal 4, which expects, by 2030, to "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN, SDG 4: 2015). Goolam Mohamedbhai, Honorary President of the International Association of Universities, stated in 2015 that: "The SDGs provide a unique opportunity to higher education institutions to demonstrate their willingness and capability of playing an active and meaningful role in the development of their respective countries and in contributing towards global sustainable development" (2015). Education that connects, in a coordinated and comprehensive way, research, teaching, learning and social engagement in a polyhedral, post-pandemic, diverse, multicultural, de-colonial world is essential for individual and social development (Tapia & Peregalli, 2020; de Sousa Santos, 2021). Building democratic culture through HE implies dismantling the 'black box' of institutions, to enable the emergence of integrated models (engaged HEIs) that coordinate their research, teaching, and social engagement/outreach activities.

b) Higher education and social engagement: a model to (re)build

Is it possible to build HE models that, guided by the identity and mission of their institutions, connect teaching, research and outreach/social engagement in an integrated way to build democratic culture? The experience and history of many HEIs worldwide, committed to the common good, community service and academic excellence, show that it is indeed possible. Many HEIs are undergoing paradigm shifts from 'ivory tower' to

'integrated' (engaged) models, but it is necessary to distinguish how they organize their social mission and to identify specific historical and regional movements, while also identifying the causes of inertia and the very real challenges (CLAYSS, 2014).

Traditionally, HEIs have had three missions: teaching, research, and extension. Each of them usually corresponds to an institutional framework and a specific organizational and management structure, which, supported by institutional policies, and produces its own organizational culture. Within HEIs these missions are often isolated or even in conflict, constituting 'islands' or 'fragments' of a whole which is neither coordinated nor integrated, giving rise to 'varied typologies', diverse recognitions, and differential evaluations. Depending on the structure of the social mission of HEIs, at least three models can be distinguished: a) ivory tower; b) context-dependent; c) comprehensive institution (Tapia, 2018). This is demonstrated in the contrast between 'serious/studious' vs. 'militant/ committed' models, between 'researchers' vs. 'committed professors', between 'professors who promote engagement and social responsibility in their subjects' vs. 'those who consider any community service a waste of time and an obstacle to academic excellence'. These antagonisms are, not only increasingly anachronistic, but also based on reductionist views of both academic quality and the social mission of HEIs. It is true that classical assistance 'solidarity campaigns' - usually necessary and meritorious - are not intended to contribute to improving scientific research. In addition, many voluntary activities are parallel to academic life and there is no need to use advanced knowledge. However, the fact remains that, to have a serious impact on, and transform social reality, it is necessary to come together with other social actors, to bring into play multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary scientific knowledge; to develop personal and group skills and to create the capacity for research, management, and innovation (Eyler Giles, 1999; EDUSOL, 2007; Ma et al. 2018). A well-planned intervention (grounded in its particular context) requires that research be conducted as meticulously - if not more

so – than that which is developed for the sole purpose of journal publication. Indeed, to intervene effectively in a community and solve real-life problems, students need to know more, not less, than the rote learning required to pass an exam.

In HEIs, the relationship between teaching, research and social engagement occurs with varying degrees of intentionality and effectiveness, but there are encouraging signs in the growing tendency to build bridges between 'thought and action', and between 'academic precision and social engagement'. It is not easy to establish the connection between scientific knowledge and social action or between learning and solidarity activity, from the epistemic (complex knowledge) perspective or from the university management perspective. However, it is essential to ensure that the knowledge produced within HEIs contributes to a better life for our societies and that the professionals trained in their classrooms contribute creatively and committedly to building a democratic culture. In this context, Service-Learning (SL), as part of a vast global movement, represents a pedagogy that connects and favors the integration of intentions, policies, and institutional cultures, which are often in conflict. It provides not only 'community-assistance experiences' but also a vision for the identity and mission of HEIs.

The institutionalization of the social engagement of HEIs is evidence of a paradigm that might seem distant, but is already implemented in many institutions worldwide (Peregalli & Gherlone, 2021). There is a long list of experiences globally in which academic life and social engagement are intertwined in the same activity in HEIs, embodying an institutional model that integrates the three missions mentioned above. From this point of view, HEIs increasingly see themselves as 'part' of the social fabric of the community, neither 'isolated' (ivory tower) nor 'subordinated to the demands of the outside' (dependent on their context). In this model, the community is no longer seen as a 'passive addressee' nor as a 'client', but as a space where learning, research, and partnerships are built, and where

community-based initiatives are a way for students, professors, and community partners to learn and conduct research.

In short, it is an integrating model in which HEIs become leaders in local development processes, establishing cooperation networks together with other participants. With the institutionalization of SL, research focuses on the needs of the territory, teaching takes place within a context and outreach addresses real needs, in participatory action with external organizations (public bodies, CSOs, companies, churches etc.). Thus, future professionals are trained by actively participating in the solution (or attention) to social problems in the community. This dynamic and dialectical movement between learning, teaching, research, and social intervention has a strong impact, not only on HEIs management, but also on the way knowledge is produced: "Social engagement is no longer seen as a 'third pillar', but rather as a critical approach to our teaching and research activities" (Younger, 2009). In other words, there is a virtual circle between learning and solidarity initiatives in the region, where academic knowledge improves service quality in joint work with the community, community action results in better integral education and knowledge production increases (EDUSOL, 2007:28). When HEIs are involved in solving real problems of a community, they work with complex realities that cannot be tackled through the narrow lens of only one academic discipline. This is why social engagement projects, eventually, overflow beyond the watertight compartments of academic departments and hyper-specialized disciplines, and open up to interdisciplinary activities.

Research and solidarity actions that deal with real problems allow us to, not only break the isolation of separate disciplines, but also to bring about new dialogue opportunities among those involved in knowledge production. This culture of dialogue and mutual recognition strengthens the fabric of citizenship and democracy. The scientific community acknowledges diverse languages and ways of producing knowledge by establishing a dialogue with the regions and designating the space as a *locus* of learning and knowledge. In this way, HEIs 'teach' and

'disseminate to' the community while, at the same time, learning from it and with it (EDUSOL, 2005). In other words, it promotes what Bordoni calls "research translation processes" (2008), as well as dialogue between the lay and the academic. This dialogue - which, in Africa, has existed for more than 50 years and is strongly associated with the decolonization of Higher Education - is now a growing trend in Latin America (Muñoz & Wangoola, 2014; de Sousa Santos, 2021). Through this, the HEI model recovers its essential mission of comprehensive training for new generations of professionals, integrating academic excellence with a social responsibility that is no longer mere lip service, but is being integrated into both the curriculum and institutional management.

Currently, HEIs are immersed in the tension between institutional models that show strong traditional inertia, and the search for alternatives to meet new and old social demands. Service-Learning programs are developed within these models, in an attempt to provide opportunities for co-ordination, both intra-institutional (within the institution) and inter-institutional (between HEIs and other institutions). They encourage the institutions to take an active role in social change, contributing to the construction of democracy and the common good in the multicultural and global village. In turn, the social engagement of HEIs worldwide pursues more and better techniques to assess civic engagement and strengthen democracy. This is reflected in the design of evaluation systems and specific tools that enable their evaluation and improvement (e.g., Holland, 2000; Furco, 2010; Wenger & Macinnis, 2011; TEFCE, 2020).

c) Higher education and social engagement: Service Learning (SL) for active citizenship

How can HEIs promote a democratic culture with a social engagement perspective? What new and deeper relationships should be established with local communities, especially those severely affected by the pandemic and its aftermath, in light of persistent inequalities? The massive SL movement in general, and the work of CLAYSS in particular, has provided some

answers to these questions, strengthening the role of HEIs, and indicating how to transform a large declaration of principles into concrete actions. The issues discussed below illustrate how it works and its pedagogy.

For twenty years, CLAYSS has been developing a series of national, regional, and global programs to promote SL pedagogy with institutions at different levels of the formal and non-formal education system and with public and private organizations. It works with educators, political and civil society leaders, and students, and seeks to contribute to better education and participatory, democratic, and fraternal culture, proving that students are 'learning to serve and serving to learn'.

Service-learning pedagogy has spread throughout the world over the last fifty years. It dates to the beginning of the 20th century (with the creation of the Mexican welfare system in 1910 and with the Argentinian Córdoba Reform Movement in 1918). The SL global movement has now been translated into active national and regional networks where several HEIs participate (Ochoa, 2010; CLAYSS-Ochoa 2014; CLAYSS-Ochoa 2016). SL practices are defined as practices that display three specific characteristics (Tapia, 2018:22): they are solidarity services designed to meet real and felt needs in a focused and effective way, with a community and not only for it; they are led by students actively involved in all stages, from planning to assessment; they are purposely integrated with learning through curricular reform, reflection on practice, development of skills for citizenship, work, and research.

CLAYSS provides a range of guidance and support services to HEIs, with a hundred HEIs having received such support to date. The following are examples of some SL projects carried out by HEIs or the curriculum areas that promote them:

- Interdisciplinary seminar for social urgency (SIUS), based in the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism (FADU) of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), Argentina. This is an optional module where advanced students from all degree courses develop interdisciplinary projects for community-based

organizations. Among the activities carried out are: the design and building of soup kitchens; the refurbishment and furnishing of premises for community centers; the design of leaflets and displays; the production of institutional videos; and the making of uniforms for youth community 'murga' [street band] (SIUS, 2022).

- Internships in urban suburbs or rural health centers based in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tucumán, Argentina. At the end of the 1990s, a curriculum reform of this degree course established that, aside from the traditional practices in a teaching hospital, all students were required to complete a mandatory six-month practice in health centers located in rural areas or peripheral neighborhoods. In 2001, due to the social and economic crisis in Argentina, many children died from malnutrition in the province, which alerted the health authorities to the impact of the emergency on the health of mothers and children. During the medical internships in marginal urban areas in 2021, the students participated in a program known as 'BIN', designed to search for, identify, diagnose, and treat child malnutrition.

- Purification and sanitation of water for household use and human consumption for the residents of the Calderas community in the municipality of Amatitlán. This project was based in the Department of Sanitary Engineering I in Rafael Landívar University in Guatemala City (Di Lascio, Tapia, Camaño & Peregalli, 2021). Prompted by their Professors, the students undertook to tackle the situation of the communities affected by the tropical storm Agatha and the eruption of the Pacaya volcano, in their final class project. The aim of the project is to improve the quality and quantity of water used by the population of Calderas for household use and human consumption, while reducing water source contamination and the risk factors affecting people's health. This involved the

following elements: design of a new water distribution system; microbiological, metal and physical-chemical analysis of water; research into the solar water disinfection (SODIS) method, a simple home method to improve the quality of the water supply; training in domestic sanitation and home-filter construction; design and donation of a model toilet; study on the hydrology of the micro watershed; and design of a drinking water treatment plant.

- Service Learning: university-rural communities and the State link. This project was based in the University of Santo Tomás, Bogotá in Colombia. It involved the faculty of Rural Development and Agricultural Sciences working with the Agriculture Secretariats of the municipalities of Girón and Piedecuesta (Department of Santander) in the specific areas of Agricultural Production and Research (Di Lascio, Tapia, Camaño & Peregalli, 2021). The project was developed to meet the needs of the Agriculture Secretariats of the municipalities to obtain the primary data required to devise their General Plans for Agricultural Technical Assistance (PGAT). It provided the students with valuable experience of SL in action and enhanced their understanding of the complexity of rural development and of the institutions working there.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, a growing number of HEIs introduce SL as a specific part of their Institutional Project, adopting this term or other similar ones. Many University Social Responsibility (USR) programs develop SL activities together with other SL programs. Several universities have established regulations that make social practices compulsory for all their students (this applies in Argentina's University of Buenos Aires, National University of Mar del Plata, and the National University of Rio Cuarto, among others). Other networks and organizations in the region focus on this as well, such as Chile's 'University Builds Country' (Universidad Construye País) project. In other cases, HEI subject chairs

introduce service learning through professional practices or internships in their communities. Teacher-training institutes are beginning to include SL in their syllabus as part of their teaching practices.

d) Higher education and social engagement: strengthening citizenship and democratic culture

Building a democratic culture, based on responsible citizenship and solidarity, is a challenge for Latin American and Caribbean societies in general, and Higher Education in particular. It poses the challenge of reinforcing its service to society (based on its identity and mission) and contributing to "eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease, through inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches" (UNESCO, 1998). Good quality education needs the two fundamental pillars of the 21st century: learning to learn and learning to live together. This means that education must develop the skills for lifelong learning and training in attitudes, values and competencies that promote solidarity, democracy, and responsibility for the destiny of others (Tedesco, 2004).

Designing comprehensive organizational models for the social mission of HEIs is a relevant (meaningful) and pertinent (timely) aspiration for today's world. Promoting systemic change in Higher Education entails identifying the causes of inertia, and prioritizing courses of action that generate engaged and solidarity-based institutions and strengthen citizen participation, associative networks, and democracy. Service-learning is a pedagogy that offers the opportunity to achieve a democratic culture based on active citizenship, which addresses the challenge of fulfilling integral education in the 21st century, and with organizational and management models to support it.

In Higher Education, moving from 'words to deeds' implies 'getting down to work' and translating declarations and statements into specific plans, programs, and projects, that make change viable and provide the conditions for the best work of an institutional collective. It is a matter of redefining the parameters regarding the work of HE and redesigning and

positioning HEIs as key participants, with a clear political role in the pursuit of the common good. This ethical view refers to a way of being and being in the world, which echoes the words of professors and students at Argentina's National University of Tucumán-Faculty of Medicine: "For some universities, the object of their existence is academic excellence. We consider that the reason for our existence is service to the people and academic excellence its best tool" (EDUSOL, 2006:11).

Universities and Higher Education Institutions generally, are called on to participate actively in every aspect of the creation of a new social contract for education:

> *From supporting research and the advancement of science, to being a contributing partner to other educational institutions and programs in their communities and across the globe, universities that are creative, innovative, and committed to strengthening education as a common good, have a key role to play in the futures of education. (UNESCO, 2021:11)*

Social engagement in HE makes sense if it focuses on strengthening democratic culture. This challenge means re-imagining institutional structures and experiences, policies and cultures. Taking responsibility for redesigning HE - and making it a reality - is a pressing concern in different parts of the world, with inertia and a variety of opinions on the role it should play and the focus of its actions frequently being causes of tension. To that end, higher education must play a leading role in this complex global scenario. It is essential that it define specific courses of action that integrate its missions into the service of the common good, denouncing injustice and building active citizenship, based on solidarity and engagement. Thus, the role of HEIs will be strengthened, better professionals will be created, and a valuable and lasting contribution will be made to improving the living conditions of communities.

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