

## **Change in University Environments: An Attempt which Signals some Difficulties\***

Education Stream

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### **Abstract**

*Certain classroom practices undermine larger enterprises like university reform movements. In a graduate course for three different groups of students, I have introduced several reforms and found three basic problems. First, there is difficulty in applying theories or ideas to improve practice; in other words, the difficulty in incarnating ideas. Second, the education system contributes to the reproduction of violence, inequality, and dependent relations. Third, there are many problems which arise from judgments, assumptions or evaluations. A closer look at what happens within a classroom illuminates the opportunities and risks faced by reformers at a systemic level. One fundamental roadblock to reform is the preservation of identities at the classroom level: students remain consumers while faculty continue to be in charge of knowledge production. In such cases, relationships continue to be hierarchical, highly constrained, violent, and judgmental. Freedom is a central issue of any reform movement: as long as students choose not to exercise their freedom, prefer to comply to certain social roles and to not challenge them, our task as faculty is not complete and accounts of university reform are simply unfounded stories.*

### **Introduction**

My purpose in this paper is twofold: first, to examine the difficulties encountered in attempts to change the educational model offered to graduate students in a particular course, and second, to relate these localized efforts to the larger enterprise of university reform. It is my contention that our concern for the manifestations of problems at the macro level result in neglecting the micro level situations where problems originate. Therefore, a closer look at what happens within a classroom can illuminate the opportunities and challenges faced by reformers at a systemic level.

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A movement towards an "engaged university" is gaining momentum in the United States (Boyer 1994, Harkavy 1998). An engaged university is one which responds to the needs of the communities it serves [including the surrounding communities where it is located]. Attempts to do away with the "ivory tower" metaphor are common nowadays. Efforts at the university level have been paired by efforts at the classroom level: a service learning movement has established an academic link between student-directed community experiences with course-directed educational work (Marullo 1998).

Most universities in peripheral nations must look within their communities for resources. They cannot depend on the state or on private enterprises for financial support. Although these universities have not been able to isolate themselves from their communities, current social problems –like inequality, violence or corruption– demand interventions and closer relationships. How to become further engaged is an open question. Where are the leverage points for becoming further engaged? Where are the toughest challenges?

A reform initiative at the university level can address research, teaching, or service issues. One can examine how research done at a particular university contributes to solve problems within its communities. Or, as is the approach in this paper, one can explore what happens with teaching proposals to change the stifling environment of traditional classes. I side with Peter Senge and his collaborators: "If you want to improve a school system, before you change the rules, look first to the ways that people think and interact together. Otherwise, the new policies and organizational structures will simply fade away, and the organization will revert, over time, to the way it was before." (2000, p. 19) What, then, hinders the transformation of classroom practices?

I have tried to innovate in several dimensions among three different groups of students attending the same graduate course. Even the name of the course, "*Observatorio del Entorno*" (which could be translated as "Context Observatory"), connotes something different for graduate students who are studying to become either human resource or marketing specialists. Despite the efforts to create a distinct relationship to knowledge and amongst ourselves, I feel the end results are similar to conventional classes. My proposal to students was to examine critical incidents, in which they were directly involved, in order to increase their understanding of the different actors, actions, and institutional contexts (Alvesson 1996, Knorr-Cetina 1981). This approach is in accordance with a model in which each participant independently discovers what he or she needs to learn, and is contrary to a model that privileges the transmission of information (Freire 1970, Rogers 1977). Why did these reform attempts fall short? What type of incremental changes have any chance of enduring? Or, should one concentrate instead on fundamental reforms?

The results presented in this paper are my analysis and interpretation of critical incidents we lived throughout the semester. Although students could focus on any issue relevant to their lives and did not need to study specifically what happened during the course, many did, and their reports are part of my data. Based on the twelve class meetings, I gathered journal entries from my teaching assistants and wrote eleven short essays. These essays and those written by students about the course were used to dialog about our interpretations of what was happening in each of the three sections of the course. As a participatory action research project, we closed the gap between subject and object of research, as well as the gap between the time when the study was conducted and the time when changes were implemented. For some of us,

observing-writing-reflecting-dialoguing-changing became a recurrent cycle. The qualitative research we undertook bridged the gap, which exists according to Wiesenfeld (2000), between the theory and practice of qualitative inquiries.

My observations below center around three issues. First, the difficulty in using theories or ideas to alter practice; in other words, the difficulty in incarnating ideas. Second, the observation of the characteristics of the education system which contribute to the reproduction of violence, inequality, and dependent relations. Third, the problems that arise when we make judgments, assumptions or evaluations. These observations result from the investigation of what occurred during some critical incidents throughout the three sections of the course.

### **About the method of inquiry**

C. Wright Mills wrote that neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society could be understood without understanding both. His call to connect “personal troubles” with “structural constraints” are frequently ignored. In the social sciences, it is common to research large social problems such as inequality, development or violence from a macro perspective. Yet the energy and effort required to examine our individual contribution to these large problems is much less.

It is possible that, because we are concentrated on the macro, we do not perceive the micro situation. Abstractions of thought are more attractive, for many researchers, than concrete daily issues. But to research, conceptualize and analyze realities at the micro level may be quite effective and once we intervene at the micro level, it may not be necessary to attempt to do so at the macro, since changes in the former bring about changes in the latter.

Mason (1994) espouses a methodology to support teachers in becoming practitioner researchers while enquiring about and improving upon their professional practice. This methodology focuses on daily events, on being aware of practices and of the awareness-in-action which guides these practices. In the “discipline of noticing”, as Mason calls it, one records incidents to delineate issues of concern, to locate structures in these issues, and to seek resonance with colleagues’ experiences.

With these ideas as background, I have proposed alternatives to the work in the courses that I coordinate. For example, in the “Observatory” course I ask students to explore particular incidents, concrete events in their lives, and to observe without judging what has taken place. I attempt to dissuade any effort to generalize or to offer intellectual critiques, but instead ask for detailed observations of any given situation and the use of outside theories and ideas to provide further insight to the situation. Texts, then, become additional material which help to reflect the given reality.

The three arguments used by Hironimus and Lovell (1999) to nourish service learning with social theory are the same that I consider relevant in asking students to concentrate on critical incidents and to use theory to further their understanding. First of all, it is fundamental that the researcher observes applying a compassionate understanding rather than objectifying the other. Second, while the student observes, ideas serve to contextualize and to socially explain when it is otherwise easy to blame the victim. Finally,

getting close to a concrete incident helps the student to question preconceived ideas about his or her role in that situation. There is a greater possibility to confront the situation in a humble manner rather than falsely believing in one's expertise for "fixing" the situation.

To ask students to research what happens in a given situation in which they are involved is to ask them to do something that they are unaccustomed to. Insist that they explore some circumstance that they are experiencing in one of their classes, rather than, for example, to look at the problem of education in Colombia. I am explicit that they not even look at education in our university. To do so, it would be necessary to observe what takes place in eight schools in many different situations. To expand the realm of the research implies a reduction of the depth of observation. I prefer that the students concentrate on that which they are directly involved in. I believe that the whole is represented in its parts, as the theory of fractals shows. Understanding one part and its relation to the whole is sufficient for understanding a reality.

As in all courses in which I participate, I demand that students conduct research rather than remain passive recipients of outside ideas. The research takes on greater meaning for students as they overcome their resistance to directly approach problems that are meaningful to them and while they are able to observe what they are feeling like a pebble in their shoe. The result of students' efforts is demonstrated in their personal testimonies. Success consists in being able to reach a better understanding of what is being lived and thereby bringing about a transformation of the situation. Some students acquire greater consciousness and are themselves transformed, while others simply comply with the minimum requirements and then move on to the next hurdle in their career.

Consideration of the student as a person and the process he or she is living in each class is as important as is the content and information given in any class. Concentrating on content is an impediment to the consideration of education as a social rather than a technical process. To consider education as a social process means to value personal experiences and their exploration. This is not a common experience for most students. As an example, in one written piece a student attempts to understand what took place and the reaction of other students in a marketing course. In her testimony, she points out the meaning to her of traditional approaches:

The students learn how to appear intelligent in class discussions. In general, a big portion of the grade is based on your ability to impress the professor with what you know, with the information you obtain, more than what you do with the information. By the end, the students end up more preoccupied with the amount of information they have acquired than with their ability to reason. Add this to the fact that people are later contracted, promoted and assigned work based on their ability to appear intelligent and not necessarily on their ability to act intelligently. . .

I realized that the problems I was solving in the university appeared to be more complex than those in my work. But, I would solve the most complex issues in the university in a weekend at most while the work problems took months to resolve. I understood that in the workplace, the solution to problems didn't only depend on my analytical skills or my technical

knowledge, but rather, in great part, on the persons who make up the organization.

This student observed what took place in her classroom and her observations at the micro level can help us to understand better the origin of some large social problems such as violence and corruption. This was the road that Kafka walked: he deeply observed his relationship with his father and with his supervisor. From these observations emerged a monumental literary work about relations of power and the potential of human nature.

The next four descriptions follow the principles outlined in this section. Each vignette stems from a particular critical incident which took place throughout one or more sections of the course, and its exploration includes looking at the relationship of the incident within the context in which it emerges. Four incidents are analyzed: the reaction of students when they are asked to share their essays, the prejudices encountered in a presentation made by a student, the reality of classroom discussions, and the protests by three students about some of the characteristics of the course.

### **A writing assignment and its discussion**

I ask students in the “Observatory” class to write a one-page essay for each session. I explain that I do not want to read neither a summary nor their critique of the suggested reading (how can a student who just comes into contact for the first time with certain material critique an approach that has taken years for an author to elaborate?). I ask them instead to write about the relationship between what they have just read and their lives. Ideally, they describe an event, a critical incident, that can be seen under a new light thanks to that day’s reading. However, students have other options: they can write about whatever is going on in their lives that came to their attention while reading, or they can concentrate on why the reading does not make sense to them. Their daily writing is a space where students may, among other things, use ideas presented by authors. During the course I decide when to collect essays and end up asking students to hand in three texts, but in any case, anyone may turn in an essay if he or she would like comments on it.

In the second class session, instead of picking up students’ first assignment I asked students to exchange their essays with their neighbor. As soon as they realized that I would not be the reader of their texts, but that rather one of their classmates would be, there was visible reaction. Rather than continue with the exercise I had planned (to comment on their classmates’ essays), I asked what was the cause of the notable disturbance.

“One thing is to turn in your work in to the professor and another is to turn it in to your classmate,” answered one student. Others added that as authors they had written private things that they had already decided to share with the professor, but not necessarily with a classmate. I asked, then, what was the origin of the distinction which allows a professor to read something private while a student may not.

“It may be out of shyness,” was the contribution of one student. “The person might feel insecure, lacking in self-confidence.” This answer was supported by the opinion of other students. When I saw that nobody offered other explanations, I intervened to ask students

to notice that while the reading for that day warned against individually centered explanations at the expense of those that recognize the structural influences, no one managed to incorporate the readings into the actual circumstances. The suggested reading for the day was a chapter from *The External Control of Organizations* by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik (1978). The warning by these authors had been ignored and everyone failed to see that the pattern of relations established in a given course are typically centered around the professor. Why is it difficult to apply outside ideas? What is the use in memorizing such ideas if they are not used to bring about some kind of transformation?

Research in education has provided many answers to these questions. David Kolb (1976) contends that for learning to take place it is important to have a concrete experience on which to reflect in order to formulate abstract concepts and to generalize about them. Then one may test these concepts and generalizations in new situations.

In the case of our class, the concrete experience was present (the rejection of my suggestion to exchange papers among students) and my task consisted in pointing out to the students that the ideas of Pfeffer and Salancik were an invitation to look for an explanation of what was taking place. The exercise was for each student to observe his or her participation in the educational system and how typically we concede to the custom of communicating almost exclusively with the professor. There is very little communication between students in a classroom, even though there is evidence to show that most learning takes place between classmates. When a student chooses to share course-related ideas he or she almost exclusively chooses to do so with the professor and not with his or her neighbor. As in other systems, the communication typically flows from the periphery towards the center and not among peripherals. Has our particular experience in peripheral countries, in our attempts to break the pattern of center-oriented communication, taught us anything? Beyond simply sharing affinities and establishing alliances, few experiences demonstrate a transformation of the framework which predominates in such hierarchies. The lack of integration of organized systems predominates and it is rare to observe the characteristic harmony of organic systems. Why does this pattern exist?

There are strong relationships of power between the professor and students in the classroom. Although there is a reciprocal dependency, the predominant perception is that it is an unequal relationship. Students depend on the approval of the professor, while he or she is seldom subject to performance review. On the contrary, few relations of dependence exist among students. In the absence of power relations, there are fewer opportunities for communication.

For some time I have been sensitive to the fact that students rarely listen to one another. It seems that most students are concentrated on what the professor is communicating and when their classmates take a turn to speak, the others take a rest or break. In other words, the practice of not listening and disconnecting is common when someone "ignorant" speaks. To only listen to the expert or the authority in a given situation exacerbates the problem of not taking into account the point of view of our peers or of someone who we consider ignorant. We compete much more than we collaborate with our neighbor. It can even be humiliating to have to seek help from a peer. To what extent do we cultivate the image of intellectual elite among ourselves?

Another problem in the pattern of communication in a university course is the primacy of the intellectual above all else. Alejandro Sanz de Santamaría, in *a Letter to a Student* (May 13, 2000), asks:

How can you *show* someone something you see when “seeing” comes from the most intimate dimensions of your life and consequently can’t be shared simply with words, concepts, theories and so forth, but rather requires that the person you are communicating with research in a personal way, in his or her own, free way, *not* in an intellectual manner? This is the most difficult challenge in every current social sphere— the family, the workplace, in friendships. But It is made even more difficult, almost impossible, in the academic world where the only thing that is respected and believed in is intellectual reasoning.

Is it helpful to observe our surroundings in order to understand a given situation? Occasionally there is an individual transformation in the deep understanding of some of the disadvantages of an educational system which gives priority to communication with the professor. If that does not take place, students move on to the next class and, in the name of their own sanity, quickly forget what took place before. And whatever role they play in the educational system does not undergo any change whatsoever.

In the incident we experienced during the second day of class, I was surprised by the difficulty of students to apply the ideas that they claimed to understand. All along the course I monitored any progress in the connection students could make between their lives and the material we covered. Some individuals established such connections, but these were far from being generalized accomplishments.

### **Classroom processes**

In a class session dedicated to better understand the political aspects experienced on a daily basis in the classroom, I came to see that many of the proposals I had made in the first class remained unincorporated. I asked the students to describe their own participation in the political situation that surrounded them. In order to conduct the class in a more democratic manner, I asked that the last person to speak appoint the next speaker (an exercise following bell hooks (1994) ideas). This is a simple way of altering the traditional professor-center and student-periphery relationship. The change, however, was not noticeable because students continued to direct their comments to me and it became evident that few of them even knew the names of their classmates. Even though each student had the opportunity to appoint the next speaker, the mental scheme of the students remained oriented towards the professor. The mental structure of the students and the physical layout of the classroom was not altered in this or in following sessions.

Why was no great change, a more democratic process, instilled in the course? Some of the responses to this question surprised me because I saw the gap between my discourse with illusory proposals in the first session and the reality experienced by the students. In the first session I introduced myself as a “student on salary,” someone-like some of them- interested in understanding better the current situation. My proposal was to observe, along

their side and in each topic, what took place between us, to research the impact of our actions in the course. Rather than to act as a professor and to profess certain beliefs and to transmit information, I proposed to coordinate sessions in which each of us could discover the validity and pertinence of the ideas presented. Although I complied with the promise to complete each of the assignments just like all the other students, to insist on the need to personally research as an antidote to swallowing whole, to be open to discuss the grading system, the majority continued to regard me as the professor who imposes his ideas and criteria.

My dissatisfaction with the results of the exercise point out the difference between my intentions and what students chose to hear. Newman (1987) explores this difference, emphasizing the importance of how students feel about our proposals as teachers and how they interpret our actions. So, there is a big gap between the proposals I put forth from day one and students responses to these proposals. Among other issues, the effort to preserve our identities might be stronger than any other force. The end result is that students remain as consumers, and I continue being in charge of the production of knowledge.

The question again arises: why is there not greater equality, more democracy in the course? I venture some hypotheses. On the one hand, I continue to manage some important resources such as information, knowledge, or even the blackboard and the daily agenda of the class. On the other hand, it is possible that the mental conditioning of students weighs more than the management of such resources. Most students come to class with a fixed idea of their role. The student is someone distinct from and inferior to the professor from whom important knowledge will be received. The professor is someone who will be recognized, at least initially, as an authority in an unequal power relation, because there is no consciousness of mutual dependency. Estanislao Zuleta warns that "as long as the student and the professor are convinced that there is one party who knows and another who does not, and that the one who knows will inform the other without the other, the student, being allowed a space for participating, for thinking for him or herself, or for expressing his or her questions, education will be lost." (1995:20) In an environment in which students do not challenge their traditional role, the very last thing we do is relate to each other as human beings and the class therefore continues along its usual unexemplary course.

We therefore cannot assume the possibility of equality or democracy. It is enough to look around, to observe any course to realize the lack of meaning behind such an assumption. Why do we think that something different will occur in a community where there are such marked differences? There are professors who intentionally distinguish and distance themselves from students. Similarly, many people in society seek to preserve, if not impose, a privileged hierarchy. The majority of the owners of capital or the administrators of resources are comfortable with a regime in which democracy and equality are simply part of a discourse. The reality is much less democratic and unequal than we lead ourselves to believe.

## A presentation and its discussion

I do not believe in the traditional division of labor in which a professor transmits information to students in a role of passive receivers. There are alternatives which transform this division of labor into one in which each actor is a responsible and active subject in the learning process. The one who learns most about a topic is the one who is responsible for presenting it to others. For this reason I distribute responsibilities among students who make presentations throughout the course. These presentations are a mirror into what students understand and how they apply their understanding.

In one presentation, a student wanted to explore why his business of recycling scrap materials had lost market participation. In researching the conditions of the business, he labeled some of the employees and transporters as corrupt. The moment he did so, his research ended and he began to make recommendations about how to avoid what he denominated "corruption". He suggested various measures that might temporarily repress undesirable actions, but they only concentrated on the symptoms of the problem. With time, people would find other means of taking advantage of the situation. The important part of the research was to understand how the system functioned, an understanding he failed to achieve because the label of "corrupt" had inhibited an understanding of the reasons why some people behaved in a certain manner.

Not only was this student showing his difficulty in grasping the value of withholding judgments, but his approach resembled what happens in our society at large. The exercise of politics in Colombia is an arena in which people tend to allow their preconceived ideas to limit their understanding of the system. The Colombian electoral system remains one of the few options for citizens whose basic needs are unmet to become visible before those who may have an impact on such needs. It is during an election when the candidate is most dependent upon his potential constituents. At other times, the relationship between elected officials and the voting population is tenuous.

The vote is the only thing the voter has to sell and, currently, its value is less than what it used to be because of the privacy in which the votes are marked. As one political analyst, Hernando Gómez Buendía, pointed out: "behind the nepotism there is tremendous poverty which the anti-politicians [those politicians who refuse to give out jobs or pave streets, but limit themselves to give speeches against politicians and to dream about a new system] choose not to see and a despair which they cannot relieve." (1998:3) Therefore, the clientelist vote is a rational one from the perspective of the economically disadvantaged. What is needed, then, to be elected? To buy votes. Electoral machines are set up to win elections and the system chooses those able to buy votes. If that is the way the system functions, what good is it to call politicians corrupt when they are playing by the rules?

One of our national pastimes is, according to Gómez Buendía, to look for easy solutions to very difficult problems. To the simplistic explanation that political ills are due to corrupt politicians, a simple solution is proposed: "we'll write a lot of editorials against the ills and we'll re-write the constitution to prohibit further corruption. Isn't it the case that needy populations elect clientelist politicians? Isn't it necessary to organize politically in order to do away with this phenomena?" (1997:3)

Practitioners of *vipassana* meditation (*vipassana* is a Sanscrit word meaning “to see things as they are”) distinguish four stages in the process of observation: pure sensation, the perception of this sensation, assignment of value to it, and reaction to it. While giving value to sensation is an activity attributed exclusively to the brain, the whole body is involved to different degrees in the other three stages. From what I understand, the objectives of *vipassana* meditation are to be conscious of each of the stages and to be able to control the passage of one to the next, in particular to appreciate the sensations before the mental process of valuing them takes place. Before placing value, we respond; we react after our brain intervenes. The most successful athletes are those whose movements come close to their perception, those who act in the space their opponents leave between perception and reaction.

Similar situations occur in our daily lives. When we discover something new, we experience the pure sensation, then we perceive it, value it and react to it. I believe it is fundamental to explore the effect of the values we introduce in our understanding of a situation. If we label someone as corrupt we are threatening our understanding by concentrating too much on individual characteristics rather than seeing the systemic environment which promotes such behavior. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) point out that we have a tendency to make such generalizations, and Chris Argyris (1991) writes about the “ladder of inferences” to describe the mental exercise of increasing abstraction which leads to mistaken beliefs. Why not leave judgments aside in the name of deepening our own understanding of how, for example, an electoral system actually functions? It is important here to point out that there is a vast difference between understanding and accepting. Once this is established, students are more willing to put their value judgments aside.

To be conscious of how our judgments threaten our comprehension is an exercise which is attractive to some students while others consider it impossible. One student cited Dale Carnegie, who said: “If God doesn’t even judge us until the end of our days, why should you or I?” Nevertheless, in numerous class practices judgments continue to obstruct our understanding.

### **Discussions around the proposed method of inquiry**

In the fourth class session a student approached me during the break and asked, “Do you think we are grasping what you are trying to convey?” He added: “your ideas are interesting but we prefer concrete things to abstractions.” That day I had brought a teaspoon to class to conduct an exercise I adapted from Brouillette and Turner (1992) in which I ask a volunteer for a sample of saliva. We all experience a very different reaction to the saliva collected in a spoon as compared to the saliva a mother uses to clean the face of her baby or the saliva exchanged in a kiss. I wanted to illustrate how, according to the social context we find ourselves in, we appreciate and react in differing ways to the very same matter (saliva in this case). My intention was to make students live the experience of feeling disgust at a teaspoon full of saliva as a concrete case of the abstract concept of the “social construction of reality”.

In the sixth session, while we exchanged impressions about a concrete experience of some members of a peasant's association from Carare, an extremely volatile region in Colombia, there too were a number of comments about what was taking place in the course itself. One student raised his hand to make the following comment: "You ask us to understand how a group of peasants have managed to pacify their region. I ask, who understands us? For example, who understands us when we can't turn in our essay?"

"You, yourself," I answered. "Any of you may write an essay with the intention of understanding why you are unable to turn in weekly a one-page writing on any issue that interests you. What impedes you from doing so?" That day, at the beginning of the session, I had asked students to turn in the following week a proposal for their final work. I suggested to choose something that they were genuinely interested in. If they chose appropriately, they would find the time to explore such issue because there would be an intrinsic, not an extrinsic motivation to do so. If not, the work would simply be felt as an obligation in order to receive a final grade and they would likely use the excuse that they did not do more because there wasn't enough time. For an employee who is interested in the work, what can be accomplished is more important than the compensation. Real interest is not located in a specific topic, but rather in what the topic reflects to the individual. Hence, the closer the topic to the life of a student, or an employee, the greater the probability that it will be of real interest.

I had made the same suggestion about choosing topics of interest for the weekly essays. Why had it fallen of deaf ears? Why did students have difficulty in reacting, from their life experience, to the readings and writing it down? It is possible that each week, faced with the proposed reading, the life of the students disappears so that the confrontation between their lives and the ideas of the authors cannot happen. This confrontation is the guarantee that the reading will be useful to their lives. It is an insurance that the reading will not be condemned to yet another intellectual exercise.

A pattern can be seen in the three situations described in this section: the feelings experienced in class, the experience of the peasant community, and the experience of students when they are asked to read assignments are all systematically ignored. These experiences do not draw much attention or are undervalued because they are particular cases, one among many. In the university environment, the vast majority prefer abstractions. The proposal for the "Observatory" class was different from its inception: to concentrate on the specific where it is more difficult to sustain a discourse, and where it is easier for consciousness to be raised about our own and more distant incongruities.

As is the case with the rupture of any tradition, fears must be overcome in order for a new way of conducting oneself to be consolidated. They are fears based on feeling different from the norm and based on an inability to act differently. In the case of students faced with the challenge of concentrating on the concrete and leaving aside abstractions, they must navigate something they are unfamiliar with and disregard the tools they have learned to use. It is important to recall the testimony of the student cited above: "students learn how to appear intelligent in class discussions" It is easier to appear intelligent when you are only manipulating ideas than when the material consists of actual and personal experiences.

### **Proposals for Change: Dust in the wind?**

I have explored several critical incidents to better understand the realities of a university environment. I have described what happens when students attempt to incarnate the ideas that they claim to understand, the reactions to proposals of a more democratic and egalitarian classroom, some of the effects of prejudices, and the reasons why many do not stand up to the challenge of exploring particular incidents that are relevant to their lives. At certain moments I have felt that my suggestions are incomprehensible, in others I have noticed both difficulty and fear of doing things differently and ultimately of looking deeply into one's own life. I have begun to distribute the various written testimonies among professors with the aim of enticing them to explore their different experiences with students for themselves. Our dialogue, then, will not be one in which one party tries to convince the other, but rather a joint exploration of the challenges and opportunities we face in the university.

As Mason states, "validation of noticing is both in one's own experience and in the experience of others. Even though, and perhaps because, validity is seen as situation and person dependent, it is essential to continue to question what one thinks one has noticed, to seek resonance in the experience of others through sharing brief but vivid accounts of incidents, and discussing observations arising from exercises or tasks which may highlight particular noticing." (1998, pp. 89-90) As research practitioners, our call is to maintain dialogues and explorations with students and other teachers. The two teaching assistants who helped in the "Observatory" course have engaged in a dialogue about the findings reported in this paper.

In the three sections of the course described, more than upheavals or noticeable transformations, our identities were preserved: the students' as consumers, and mine as faculty in charge of knowledge production. The institutional context weighs heavily: an educational context in which faculty play a leading role with extremely asymmetrical relationships to students, who are pressured by grades and who encounter difficulties in exerting their freedom. My attempts to forge more symmetrical relations, to give voice to students, and to encourage their discoveries were countered by the educational context they have endured their entire lives. Our relationships, despite my intentions, remained hierarchical, highly constrained, violent, and judgmental.

What can be done then? I will try new approaches. The poor results of the incremental reforms I described do not rule out incremental reforms per se. Although pressed for fundamental reforms, the kind and scope of these reforms is up for discussion and the question remains: will they transform university life? It is my contention that structural changes are not very effective. Changes at the personal level, namely an increased consciousness, are required. Whenever individuals are not transformed, the structural changes just bring about a reshuffling of the system. Similarly, Seymour Sarason (1990) emphasizes the need to recognize the values and attitudes about power, privilege, and knowledge that keep existing structures and regulations in place.

A central issue of any reform is freedom. As long as students choose not to exercise their freedom, prefer to comply to certain pressures and not to break free from them, our task as faculty is incomplete. In such cases, the seeds for social change remain unsown. Students who fail to exercise their freedom cannot belong to an "engaged university", a university which responds to the needs of the communities it serves. Students are part of the community a

university serves. Their need for freedom should be satisfied. The four critical incidents described do not portray free students. A “free” student is one who uses knowledge to better understand his or her life, who thrives in democratic and egalitarian environments, who is not blinded by prejudice, and who is an actor in his/her own learning processes. Such a portrait is an exception, not the rule in the university I work in. However, “freedom” and “autonomy” are key words in the university’s mission and educational project.

Can those few students who act freely and the faculty who want them to do so change the landscape in the near future? The university reform movement is helping with the context, but until the changes affect classroom practices one cannot speak of an “engaged university”. The classroom becomes a test site for all of our grandiose ideas like freedom, democracy, and equality. Our shortcomings in bringing them to life simply signal the difficulties in the journey.

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