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THE FLEXIBILITY OF THE CURRICULUM AS A STRATEGY FOR EXERCISING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

This paper is guided by two principal ideas, the first one is about curriculum flexibility in the context of globalization and the second one is about the function of generating skills for the job market. Both are challenges that the Institutions for Undergraduate Education (IES) have to face in training their alumni. In this case we considered as a point of reference some aspects from the Science in Education Program of the Autonomous University of Hidalgo (UAEH).

Key words: Education Flexibility, Undergraduate Education, Globalization, Curriculum Justice

Introduction

If we consider as a basic principle that one of the fundamental tasks of undergraduate education is training social actors for the job market and for the exercise of their citizenship (among other functions), we cannot ignore the social justice factor as an aspect of the training process where equal opportunities are promoted and (from a Human Rights perspective) the promotion and development of skills that allow the creation of ethical principles in the youth who are trained in the classrooms. This would enable them to aid, through their daily activities, the advancement of a more equal world.

Latin America, like other countries from the European, African and Asian Continents, has been immersed in globalized processes that are promoted by multinational companies, phenomena that has been studied by several experts in the field (Castells, 2000; Hopenhayn & Ottone, 2001; Tedesco, 2000; Brunner, 2000; Giddens, 2000, *inter alia*). Their results have shown that we are living in a new postindustrial age, that the economy and the society of knowledge are opening new production paths (post-fordism), in which money and job factors still predominate as essential elements of the production process. One of the tendencies pointed out by these authors is that knowledge and new network based production organization, is trying to rule the current production scenario. This implies a new way of production organization (like *toyotismo*) determined by a flexible specialization, also called productive flexibility.

The recognition of globalization as a process that traverses a certain time period in which new perspectives of life, education, economy and work have emerged, also means facing new ethics and values globally constituted and linked to individualism. Such effects of globalization have their major expression in the access to markets without boundaries and standardized local consumptions. Or as David Harvey (2006) expresses: globalization, as well as neoliberalism, defends greater privatization with the resultant loss of government provided social services.

For this reason, the globalization conditions joined by the society of knowledge represent a challenge to formal education (especially for undergraduate studies),

while we are trying to defend knowledge that responds to the market needs, but that also promotes alternative values to the hegemonic system and its cultural consequences, drawn under the postmodernism blanket.

In this sense of things, the adjustments, modifications, and reformulations of the undergraduate education programs acquire especial importance. For that, we are analyzing the role of education flexibility before the transformations that globalization has imposed, particularly with changes to academic, curricular and procedural structures. Also analyzing how the educational field had to adapt to changes of job and economic markets (market flexibility and new skills), as a consequence of a new economy (knowledge economy); this in the public universities context.

Globalization as a context for flexible curriculum

Globalization is a process through which new perspectives of life, education, economy, and work have emerged. It results in new ethics and values, globally constituted and linked to individualism. It has its major expression in the access to markets without boundaries and standardized local consumptions. This represents a challenge to education because of the proposal, not only of a new system for content management and pedagogical methodologies, but also of alternative values for this hegemonic system and its cultural consequences drawn under the postmodernism blanket.

In accordance with Diaz-Villa & Nieto (2012), globalization and post-modernism imply a new economic regime and sociocultural processes (a new type of logic) expressed in new ethics, ways of being, learning, making, teaching, and consuming that go beyond space-time limits. They imply social, scientific, technologic, educational, and cultural transformations that share life diversity as a common characteristic. Globalization has spread the ideology of a common well-being, burying the glorious idea of duty (Lipovetsky, 2002).

Conversely, the increased development and usage of information and communication technologies (ICT) for production and services have made possible another kind of access to information and culture, transforming classic ways of production and establishing, little by little, new ways of production organization (flexible specialization¹ or productive flexibility) and of business organization (market readjustments), as well as new job ethics.

In this line of thought and in accordance with Richard Sennet (2000), current capitalism emphasizes flexibility and attacks rigid forms of bureaucracy and the evil of blind routines. Workers are asked to possess an agile mind and to be open to changes, to accept one risk after another rather than following a straight professional career path for their entire lives. The argument presented being that, flexibility leads people being freed to choose or shape their own lifestyles.

¹ The term flexible specialization (*post-fordism*) implies the end of massive standardized production (*fordism*), turning it into consumption preference changes, this is, changing from a producer economy to a consumer economy (Cocco & Vercellone, 2001: 3).

Curriculum flexibility as a way of producing knowledge

Based on previous context, knowledge (current productivity pillar) mostly rises from research activities and these activities take place principally at universities. In this sense, globalization definitely impacts education, particularly the curriculum aspect, because that is where the necessary elements for productive activity are formed (human capital), knowledge generation, and economic development, especially if productive flexibility has been transforming work activities.

Flexibility has always been present in education and may be viewed from different perspectives. For example, as a remover of limits, or as a provider of choice. It is manifested by changes such as removal of rigid structures and a provision of a system where versatility, elasticity, openness, agility, adaptability are driving forces and a module based structure is often used (Diaz-Villa, 2011). However, flexibility is a relational principle that can be present in any type of organization or distribution, and in different social relationships. From this perspective flexibility is about relations and the possibility of social transformation; it forms part of a structure and establishes a flexible power relationship within that structure. Therefore, every relation presupposes limits, boundaries, differences between its subjects, produced contents, organization, and societal relationships. The strength of the limits marks the differences and the identity of the subject in question: asymmetrical relations are reproduced or, equal or unequal conditions are promoted.

It is possible to find curricula which prioritize content, ignoring the importance of social relations not considering the particular characteristics of the subjects being trained, or their need for life long education.

Skills in the flexibility field and the market

Currently, we are immersed in a conception where the productivity impulse is dominated by knowledge, the employee's expertise, the human talent, and their results (performance). There is the appreciation of human work combined with the use of technology... These conditions are making the difference, in the context of an organization (a company, or a social, private or public institution) that is valued and recognized for being competitive, demonstrating a difference between the modern skilled workforce and yesterday's workers who relied on hard work not technology.

To be competent companies have to constantly adjust and continuously learn how to adapt to change (Vargas et al, 2001). That is why they tend to observe and evaluate the capacity and performance of workers (job competence) under certain productive conditions (performed tasks); their knowledge, skills and abilities combined with their own personal characteristics (communication, comprehension, processing and information usage, negotiation, and assistance to clients). That is how job competence is visualized as the element that enables a worker to obtain successful results, accomplish goals, objectives and solve problem that may arise in work (as an individual's action resulting from knowledge) (Nieto & Diaz-Villa, 2008.) Therefore, the skills and their development are identified with guidelines, values and conduct patterns of workers in social interaction, and are visible in production results.

Current professional training, influenced by changes produced in a so-called postindustrial society of information or knowledge (Giddens, 1996), suggests responding to the challenges presented by new conditions of flexible working activity, rather than depending on known and routine situations but on emergent conditions that require innovation and learning, so as to produce intelligent answers to new and unknown problems in the new flexible job market (Diaz Villa, 2006). It requires an interconnected relation between academic, professional, and labor fields.

In such a field relation, it has been hard to deal with, or even more, to make clear in a curriculum program the difference between skills, competencies, performance, professional skills, and work skills. To clarify this problem we have to remember that the notion of competence arose in the labor and economic fields and has been adopted into the academic field. A *skilled worker* is the one that includes knowledge, skills, abilities, previous experiences, and comprehension of the process which he/she is taking part. A skill is acquired in performance (it is not taught) and developed by an individual or a group. It is activated in performance and practiced in a social interaction context and it results in competencies in contact with social and professional contexts (Nieto & Diaz-Villa, 2008).

According to Nieto & Diaz-Villa (2008), skills are associated with a person's knowledge or learning objectives (it is inherent to people), therefore they are characteristics of the person involved hence it may be inferred that skills are not taught but developed, noticed in performance (specific actions), in different social interaction expressions and seen in results and evidence.

Competence is the individual action that results from knowledge and social interaction, and skills are in fact performances indicated by guidelines, values, and conduct patterns in changing contexts from singular (competence) to plural (skills development).

Skills as guidelines for flexible curriculum design

Such professional skills can be included in a curriculum and joined by desired work skills. It is not convenient to restrict a curriculum to work skills, because this can lead to a dependent relation between the university and the work market. The most convenient thing to do is to identify that professional skills, IES needs to generate the necessary conditions for professional and work skills development which may lead individuals to have a successful performance in the job market.

Undergraduate education, therefore, must assure certain basic learning including generic skills for life, differentiating between essential and desirable learning by developing the proposal of learning how to learn and teaching in a way that aids skill development, and encourages the application of knowledge. As Cesar Coll (2007: 37) says:

[...] to acquire and develop a skill – as well as developing a capacity – we have to absorb and own a series of knowledge associated with it, besides, not instead of, learning how to move and apply them.

Skills development has turned into a principal matter, or perhaps a fashion, in the making of curricula, and generally it goes together with the notion of *flexible training* for the job market. This is where a diversity of learning modalities is promoted, giving greater independence and versatility to students. It demands from the school a new administrative, academic, teaching, and curriculum organization.

These new ways of relating and building knowledge “had represented a change to professional training, from an education based in academic contents (encyclopedic) to an education centered in problems and processes, this is, to a more contextualized (specific) education” (Diaz-Villa, 2011: 21), they necessarily imply the changing of the learning process, from a traditional model of vertical hierarchical organization (focused on the teacher) to a model based in auto-control and self-organization from students.

To Diaz-Villa (2011), the curriculum based on training and development of skills has to do with a relation between activity, context, and sociocultural interaction, since skills result from performance. Learning takes place in social practices. It then implies a sociocultural context where activity and development of the skill is being held. This means that, in IES, there cannot exist offers of “skills packages” that can be observed or described, nor be taught, but each one of them is developed by performance in the whole training process, with the inherent characteristics of each institution and its surroundings.

In this sense, competence supposes a combination of three elements: a) information, b) skill development, and c) the application in an unknown situation, for which is needed: 1) *knowing what* (developing the skill that allow social interaction); 2) *knowing how* (establishing links with social, cultural, political, economic environments, depending on the case); and 3) *being capable* (applying for several situations the knowing what and how).

In the Science in Education Program of UAEH, the development of several skills is promoted: generic ones oriented to personal and training development and citizenship exercise; and specific ones related with the professional field and the graduation profile. Generic skills (communication, training, judgmental thinking, creativity, and collaborative leadership) are those that a professional must have to successfully perform his/her work activities. To achieve them, the internal coherence of the program is essential to assure a real performance in different professional fields and contexts.

Specific skills (academic management, training in the field of education sciences, academic research, teaching practice for diversity and intercultural exercise) are defined as specialized knowledge to realize specific activities of a profession or discipline. They are developed in a certain context to apply knowledge to problem solutions related with professional field situations, in accordance with rules that are recognized by national and international certifying institutions.

In theory, this proposal represents a variety of professional training possibilities that imply, on one hand, the taking care of social requests for training and citizen competencies (individual characteristics and qualities), and therefore, the development of skills and abilities in the field of education sciences to assist and resolve socio-education issues.

An essential component about professional skills development is assessment that according to Nieto & Diaz-Villa (2008), allows the identification of competence and the level of performance by an individual, in relation to applicability, relevance, and organization of the specific activities of the specific professional field. It is necessary to consider that it is about a training process where we can only evaluate skills development from observation of performance, not merely as an evaluation of what has been taught. In light of the above in order to accomplish flexible training,

academic institutions will have to modify or restructure their organization and practices. They will need the application of alternative academic and curriculum organization which involves generating new ways of teaching.

Conclusions

According to the discussion above we have to recognize that curriculum flexibility and opening possibilities to assist diversity will make curriculum suitability possible, so undergraduate education may respond to people's requests. In addition, a flexible curriculum makes it possible for people to add essential content which will allow them to compete more equally, in an open way, in job markets.

Such innovations will allow the generation of alternative curricula that will have a more diverse response to the needs of the professional field in a globalized world.

Generic skills offer students equal conditions in their training, trying to reinforce national identity, as well as having the necessary skills to exercise citizenship with and in their community, enhancing local production.

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