

EMPOWERING MORE PROACTIVE CITIZENS THROUGH DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION: THE RESULTS OF THREE LEARNING PRACTICES DEVELOPED IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sandra Saúde, Ana Paula Zarcos & Albertina Raposo

Abstract: In today's society, schools have the ultimate responsibility to help students increase their awareness and understanding of the interdependent and unequal world in which we live, through a process of interactive learning, debate, reflection and action. With this in mind, development education (DE) has a crucial role to play through the development of analysis, reflection and action skills in tackling the effects of globalisation and the multiple dimensions of (un)sustainability and (in)justice in today's world. In this article, based on the assumptions, objectives, and results obtained in three interactive learning practices, we describe how DE, based on a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) methodology was successfully used in higher education to challenge and transform worldviews and to prepare students (and teachers) to act for a more just and sustainable world. The effectiveness of the practices has been demonstrated by the students' acquisition of a more complete understanding of what it means to be a proactive citizen.

Key Words: Development Education; Global and Critical Education; Problem-Based Learning; Higher Education.

Introduction

The profound changes that we have experienced at the political, economic, social and cultural levels of our so-called 'postmodern' society pose immense challenges to teaching and learning methods, in order to empower students to take action for a more just and sustainable world. As Jara (2016: 23) pointed out:

“It is imperative that we educators, who commit ourselves with the transformation in our daily practices, ask what dilemmas and what

challenges we face in order to develop in our practices this education for transformation and through it, be part of educational policies and educational guidelines”.

The educational process must be experienced in the context of citizenship; that is, it must be planned and implemented according to values and principles that respond to the questions posed by society. Far from suggesting that the entire responsibility for education belongs to schools or that every problem has an educational solution, it is, however, our conviction that school has a central role in guaranteeing the democratisation of knowledge. It is fundamental that schools, in cooperation with other actors in the educational process (such as families, businesses, civil society organisations, among others), play their part as facilitators of a better understanding of the global world. This will be achieved by critical and constructive reflection on all matters that contribute to global and local citizenship, especially those that ensure a commitment to a more just and sustainable world.

One of the main focuses of the educational process must be the assumption that knowledge is partial and incomplete. According to the personal experience of each individual, every citizen must be prepared to assume the limitations of their view of the world, to be able to unlearn, to question, and to transform their worldview with others. In this regard, Andreotti and de Souza (2008a) argued that it is urgent to ensure a critical global citizenship education based on the analysis and reflection of the complex structural causes of current social dynamics, which prompt a global non-reductionist or fragmented understanding of phenomena. It is vital that education fosters: learning to unlearn, learning to listen, learning to learn, learning to reach out, and learning to read the world (Andreotti and de Souza, 2008b).

Development education (DE), with its global outlook, emphasis on social justice and focus on critical pedagogy and learning processes, has a strong contribution to make to all of these debates. It is, therefore,

particularly relevant in the contemporary context, characterised by an increasing recognition of the fact that education is pivotal in a rapidly changing world, to (re)centre education on its key social role, aiming to develop:

“the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable people to contribute to and benefit from an inclusive and sustainable future. ... Education needs to aim to do more than prepare young people for the world of work; it needs to equip students with the skills they need to become active, responsible and engaged citizens” (OECD, 2018: 4).

Development education as a critical and global education

The concept of DE starts in the 1940s and 50s strongly associated with assistencialist / charitable perspectives. In that period, though, the term DE is not used; words like humanitarian aid, assistance and charity are used instead. From the 1960s onwards, DE evolves into a new stage, based on the firm belief that every country could achieve successful development. This concept was by the developed world willing to support developing countries to obtain the capital necessary to meet their basic needs. This was, however, according to Andreotti and de Souza (2008b), an extremely eurocentric view. Besides, they argued, that the ‘northern countries’ were left unaccountable for the colonisation processes and the potentialities of the so-called underdeveloped countries were disregarded.

The 1970s gave birth to a third DE generation. Instead of a paradigm based on the antagonism between developed and developing countries, the emphasis is now placed on the recognition of the potential of international cooperation and on the respect for individual rights and freedom. DE is then concerned with the defence of international understanding, cooperation and peace, founded on values such as the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (as recommended by UNESCO in 1974).

During the 1980s, there is a reconceptualisation of the relationship ‘man-society-development’, based on the concepts of human development and sustainable development. People now fight for a type of development that guarantees the dignity and well-being of all the world citizens and their potential to meet their present needs, without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs as assumed in the 1987 Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (UN, 1987). That’s when sustainability became a new key dimension of DE.

Since the 1990s, the crisis of the welfare state in the western world and the fall of the former eastern bloc have brought a new focus to world problems. Globalisation and the privatisation of the world economy, as well as the consequent phenomena of exclusion, create new challenges, demanding from societies and citizens’ attitudes of commitment, civic engagement and greater activism. To reach this end, the strategy has to consist of giving a voice to minorities and the excluded, so that they can show their sociocultural identities and have a say on their future. In this context, DE must promote a citizenship that is critical, global and local, at the same time. That is exactly what the 2002 Maastricht Declaration, as well as resolution 1318 issued by the *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe* in 2013, establish, recognising that the promotion of global education is an essential component of current educational goals.

Today, we live and interact in an increasingly globalised world. This requires greater competencies, both individual and collective, to reflect upon and understand the complex relationships that exist, thus enhancing the capacity for conscious, fair, and sustainable decision-making and action. On this matter, Skinner, Blum and Bourn (2013: 95) declared:

“The nature of globalisation demands that educational programmes in all countries prepare young people to understand global relationships and concerns, cope with complex problems and live with rapid change and uncertainty. Insufficient recognition of the importance of these issues in international education and

development policy, not to mention research, undermines international efforts to engage all citizens around the world (and not just those in the global North) with development processes and debates”.

DE, which followed the metamorphoses and the evolution of the concept of development, is currently an integrated critical approach to the complex themes of global development, with the main objective of instilling values, principles, attitudes and actions towards a more just, inclusive, equitable and sustainable world. The purpose is to offer the most complete and critical view of the reality involving life in society, in all its aspects, eliminating taboos and fragmented perspectives shaped by dominant powers (political, economic, media and/or others). We live indeed in the age of social media and instant information, which easily adulterates and influences the opinion and even the knowledge we construct about the reality around us. This is why it is increasingly necessary to develop critical reflective thinking, free from (im)mediatism and, above all, the springboard for conscious and independent decision-making and action.

What is at stake today is not the logic of an exclusive, preferential model of development (because it is, by now, clear that the ideal development model is a fallacy), but rather the integral development of a more fair and sustainable society, conscious of its limitations and errors, and also of the resources and potentialities existing in each territory. In order to attain this objective, it is crucial to invest in DE, aiming to help ‘(...) every learner develop as a whole person, fulfil his or her potential and help shape a shared future built on the well-being of individuals, communities and the planet’ (OECD, 2018: 3).

In conclusion, the critical approach of DE that draws on the work of theorists such as Paulo Freire (1970), bell hooks (1994) and Henry Giroux (2005) among others, has, according to Skinner, Blum and Bourn (2013: 95), ‘a significant role to play in the development of effective learning, skills, global engagement and critical thinking amongst young people around the

world'. Rather than an approach or pedagogical strategy based on the assumptions and methodology of action-research and action learning (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006), DE is also a philosophy of pedagogical interaction and interpretation of the world. By the non-authoritarian or manipulative organisation of the creative process, it is possible to construct a more thorough knowledge of the (in)finity of the world and, simultaneously, more structuring of an active citizenship, aware of the multiple variables that must be taken into account in daily decisions.

The role of active learning methodologies in development education

At the heart of the DE approach is the emphasis on learners' ability to think critically about their lives and circumstances. So, it is essential that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) be dominant and structural in the educational process, as opposed to the passive acritical approach, typical of the so-called 'banking learning', which many unfortunately still privilege. As Paulo Freire (1970) defended, as quoted by Cowden (2010: 25):

"Banking education involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient listening objects (the students) . . . His [sic] task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance".

"Problem solving education. . . consists of acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. . . through dialogue. . . the teacher is no longer the- one- who- teaches but who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach".

In order to fully accomplish these principles, it is necessary to close the cycle of the pedagogy of understanding, implementing and/or consolidating the pedagogy of intervention (Giroux, 2005). A pedagogy that is emancipating and promotes social change; one that focuses on qualifying

citizens to effectively respond to the challenges of contemporary society and to recognise the connections between their individual concerns and experiences and the wider social contexts in which they are embedded. This approach is focused on learning strategies that are open and participatory, but also deeply political, incorporating the recognition of power. As a consequence, it requires teachers capable of stimulating collaborative and critical learning processes (hooks, 1994), and who can raise students' awareness of the paradigms, the reductive worldviews, and the taboos still existing in the twenty-first century. As Andreotti and de Souza (2008a: 34) stated:

“to equip learners to listen to one another and work together to create new possibilities for an equitable and sustainable future, (development) education will need to challenge its boundaries, become self-reflexive, diversify its constituency, raise its professional profile, operate inter-disciplinarily, focus on the interface between development and culture, articulate the connections between theories and practices and, in accountable ways, face the challenge of walking the minefields”.

With the evolution of society and of what we know about it, a school or university, equipped with all its structural and scientific resources, must open its doors so that a true exchange with society occurs, not only in what concerns the exchange of knowledge, but, most importantly, to fulfil its first purpose, which is the collaborative construction of knowledge.

PBL has been used for some time as a method to educate students using realistic problem-based actions (Bate et al., 2013). Starting from a given problematic situation, the students identify learning pathways and explanatory hypotheses, which allow them to better understand the problem and achieve their learning objectives. As Barret and Cashman suggested (2010: 8):

“PBL is a total approach that has four interrelated dimensions:

1. An ill-structured challenging problem is presented to students at the start of the learning process. The sequencing of presenting the problem before any other curriculum inputs is a key and distinguishing characteristic of PBL.
2. Students work on the problem in small PBL tutorial teams generally with 5-8 students per team. The role of the PBL tutor is to facilitate the learning process.
3. PBL is underpinned by a philosophy of education that focuses on students learning rather than teachers teaching.
4. PBL compatible assessments aim to ensure that authentic assessments are aligned with learning outcomes and the problem-based learning process”.

Inspired by popular education, active learning methodologies, of which PBL is one of the most prominent, consider all learners to be in a condition of equality, providing interaction and complementarity. Interactive methodologies rely on shared responsibility for change. What is at stake is a teaching-learning philosophy in which, through critical and experiential reflection on a given problem, learners/citizens can fully understand it and/or identify a solution, collaboratively, being therefore encouraged to change reality. By doing so, they gain experience and knowledge, not only by reflecting on the data itself, but, mainly, by developing their own social culture (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2006) and by making decisions and acting accordingly, in practice.

Active learning methodologies, among which we emphasise the PBL approach, are an operational asset that adds to and shares value with DE. Rather than an action logic, they are pedagogical philosophies based on the assumption that only through the critical thorough analyses of reality and the cooperation and sharing of knowledge it will be possible to fulfil the objective of having truly knowledgeable citizens, capable of acting upon their society, contributing to a more just, cohesive and sustainable humanity. In

short, active learning methodologies provide DE with pedagogical tools to promote awareness, transform worldviews and improve critical analysis and constructive action.

Based on these assumptions, and aware of our responsibility as university teachers, we engaged in three different learning practices. These practices took place at the Polytechnic Institute of Beja (IPBeja), in Portugal, with students of three different curricular units taking three different degrees. The common goal was to empower more reflective and proactive citizens, equipped with skills that allow them to interpret the extremely ‘encoded and fallacious’ reality that surrounds them. We were guided by the following principles: interpretation must involve thorough research on what is known about the reality in question; interpretation must resort to the best analysis strategies, both individual and collective; interpretation may lead to the identification of possible solutions or to the improvement of the existing data on the matter; that this ‘new’ knowledge may contribute to a more conscious, demanding and active citizenship.

Empowering more proactive citizens through DE based on PBL methodologies: the results of three learning practices

Practice 1: Challenging the boundaries of learning

The context

The curricular unit of Animal Production belongs to the post-secondary course in Mediterranean Farming. During the academic year, we decided to challenge the students with the question ‘What would you like to do in this unit?’. Participative training techniques were used to help them answer this question and steer them through the work. In accordance with students’ expectations, it was decided to organise a full day meeting to share experiences and knowledge between students and farmers, technicians and researchers, focused on good sustainable practices of Mediterranean agricultural production. In addition to the scientific aspect, the proposal aimed, first and foremost, to value the shared construction of knowledge, testing the students’ and teachers’ ability to construct, in an ongoing mode

(throughout the various sessions), a learning itinerary that met their interests and needs. Knowledge was consolidated through an event, organised collaboratively, aiming to mobilise critical and reflective learning about the various key topics associated with current challenges posed to Mediterranean agriculture.

Methodology

The different steps used throughout the process were systematised as follows:

- 1) Where we are and where we want to go: a reverse classroom methodology was used, inviting the students to a silent dialogue supporting a review of all the contents they had learned before.
- 2) Organisation of the event – what will it be like? The format, the themes and the guest speakers were chosen.
- 3) Task distribution among groups. The students assumed total responsibility for the organisation, under the supervision of the teacher. The difficulties were solved in each group through solution-centred reflection.

Results

The ‘full day of sharing experiences and knowledge’ had the participation of eight guest speakers, and four simultaneous workshop sessions focusing on the production of: fresh goat cheese, olive oil sweets, fruit caviar, and acorn biscuits. The event was open to the academic and non-academic communities.

In the end, students recognised how much they had learned, even transcending the scope of the unit topics, and all of them agreed that the success was due to the fact that the work was done collaboratively and consensually. With the negotiation of the consensus before making a decision, they learned to listen to each other, to accept different opinions, and to reflect on them in an inclusive way, considering the different individual positions as a contribution to the common action. This learning experience also provided an opportunity for the critical confrontation with the positive

and negative aspects, as well as the threats and opportunities of Mediterranean agriculture today, namely the products which were in debate.

Practice 2: Breaking taboos about death

The context

In Latin societies, death undoubtedly remains a taboo subject. However, attitudes toward death, and the level of anxiety experienced when faced with death and dying, vary from one individual to another. On the other hand, death attitudes are related to and influenced by individual beliefs and social and cultural environment. Death anxiety is defined by Abdel-Khalek and Tomás-Sábado (2005) as the set of negative human emotions characterised by worry, anxiety and insecurity, accompanied by apprehension, tension or distress generated by the awareness of one's own death, by seeing symbols related to death or by feelings of imminent danger. However, death is an inevitable phenomenon. Indeed, despite our attempts to control it, death, disease, and suffering are reminders of how little power we have over the circumstances of our lives (Aradilla-Herrero, Tomás-Sábado and Gómez-Benito 2013).

In what concerns nurse education, it has been observed that the way death is dealt with when training nursing students does not sufficiently prepare them for real situations and to ensure the appropriate support for patients and their families. In order to help students to confront the individual meaning of death, a learning practice was developed in the context of the curricular unit of Relational Intervention in Nursing, in the first semester of the first year of the Nursing degree.

Methodology

We used a group dynamics methodology, focusing on one question: 'What is the meaning of death and dying?' Each student wrote an anonymous card, sharing his/her idea about death. The information obtained through this strategy was shared within the different groups. Helped by the teacher, they were led to find the various meanings of death and dying, by identifying structured categories in the discourses shared. According to these findings,

three groups of meanings were identified: fear of death; non-acceptance of death itself; death as a concept.

The categories identified motivated the class reflection around the fear and non-acceptance of death. The purpose was to break the taboo related to death and, above all, to reinforce the understanding on human life frailty and its finitude. This method provided an atmosphere of interaction and reciprocity between the members of each group and the teacher. It also gave the participants an opportunity to carefully listen to and accept each other's experiences in this matter.

Results

The reflection made it possible to realise that the best way to work on themes that are taboo is to talk about them. The discussion contributed, first of all, to sensitise this group of students from different social and cultural backgrounds for the subject of death. In addition, it was an opportunity to reflect critically, both individually and in groups, about how social and interpretative taboos are created on certain issues, namely death, therefore conditioning and limiting one's personal and social development.

This practice was based on self-reflection, which led the participants to question not only others, but also themselves, in particular about their own finitude and that of the ecosystem around them. The discussion also focused on how serious reflection about such dimensions of human life is systematically avoided. We assumed the principles of citizenship education and the development of global skills aiming for the transformation of worldviews. Having death as a starting point for debate, since it is a topic highly neglected in western societies, we sought to enrich the individual and collective understanding of the multiple dimensions of human life.

The educational processes should help students to deal with taboos in a way that they can be interpreted and difficulties overcome. For nurses, death is a reality that they often encounter, therefore it is crucial that they can work through their personal values, concepts, and prejudices about death and dying.

Practice 3: Demystifying common-sense representations about the meaning of development

The context

The concept of development is one of the most commonly used and, simultaneously, one of the most trivialised. It is often used, particularly when we sum up in one expression the desire to have a better and fairer society. However, what does development truly mean? What meanings are associated with it? What characteristics must nations or communities seek in order to be developed? In a master's degree focusing on training local development practitioners, such as the master's degree in Community Development and Entrepreneurship, taught at the IPBeja, the reflection on the theoretical and, most of all, practical meaning of the concept of development is absolutely central.

Methodology

Since it is a concept so often used, session 1 began precisely with the challenge: 'What is development to you and how do you define it? Individually, each student shared with the class his/her meaning of development, writing it on the board. They were asked to do so in words, phrases or very short sentences. Based on the ideas shared we concluded that, to them, development meant essentially: growth; progress; industrial production; employment; job creation; evolution; technological advancements; innovation; qualification; good infrastructures.

Then the students were asked to organise themselves into groups of no more than five people. Each group had to choose from a list of key stakeholders with responsibilities in local development (in very different areas, such as: health, culture, social security, education, local/regional organisations that work with: unemployed, migrant or poor people and/or in charge of business centres). Each group would have to reflect on the meaning of the concept of development with the person chosen, in a face-to-face meeting. Fieldwork was carried out in the week following session 1.

The results obtained were shared in session 2 in the same format: to define development in single words, phrases or very short sentences. The results were very different from those obtained in session 1, though. The most repeated expressions/words were now: social justice; inclusion; education; access to health; culture; equal income distribution; employment; quality of life; environmental/ecosystem awareness. Because of the fieldwork, the representations associated with development had moved from a purely economic view, typical of the first scientific meanings of development, to a more complete and correct perspective, according to which development is associated with social welfare, equitable distribution of economic, cultural, and educational resources and/or access to health resources and global justice.

Results

Through this shared learning experience, it was possible to demystify typical representations of the dominant discourse which, through redundancy and ‘social amplification’, have become almost irrefutable truths. The purpose of this exercise was precisely to make the students aware of the need to break with the preformatted ‘truths’ through critical analysis and based on real observed data. Education has this responsibility: to foster the critical, reflexive and proactive spirit of the students.

Conclusion

Based on active learning techniques, DE stimulates students to learn in an autonomous, responsible, reflexive, knowledge-generating way and, at the same time, increases their capacity for action, regarded here as practical work and research. Students and teachers engaged in PBL make more real-life connections and school is regarded not simply as a place where you go to learn but instead becomes the entire experience of learning itself. We are always learning, always growing, always experimenting.

According to these learning practices, we realise that DE based on PBL:

- develops students’ competences, preparing them to act and to be critical,

- promotes collaborative work and leads to a common focus, and
- improves the affective relationships that generate students' and teachers' transformation, by developing significant empowerment skills.

In short, DE challenges the boundaries of learning and provides the improvement of skills and knowledge that are essential in our day-to-day lives. The end result is the empowerment of citizens for the twenty-first century, who can take thoughtful and calculated risks, engage in experiential learning, persist in problem-solving, embrace collaboration, and work through creative processes.

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Sandra Saúde has a PhD in Sociology, with specialisation in Sociology of Development. She is associate professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Beja (IPBeja) and researcher at CICS.NOVA – Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences. Over the last twenty years, she has participated in and coordinated several research projects financed by Portuguese and European funds, namely in the area of local and regional sustainable development. Current subjects of scientific interest, with some papers and books already published, include: education and regional development, and evaluation and/or assessment of societal impacts/outcomes.

Ana Paula Zarcos has a Master's degree in Nursing, with a specialisation in Mental Health and Psychiatry. Associate professor at the IPBeja, with a special interest in education for global citizenship and education for mental health, she has published several papers and organised workshops on these themes.

Albertina Raposo holds a PhD in Environmental Sciences. She is associate professor at IPBeja and researcher at the Centre of

Marine Sciences and Environment (MARE). Some of her academic interests include education for global citizenship, development education, public participation and nature conservation, themes she approaches both in class and in the community. Currently, she integrates a collaborative team in the scope of project Sinergias ED: Strengthening the connection between research and action in Development Education in Portugal.