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The politics of learning within Post-Yerevan EHEA:

Some epistemological remarks on the role of university lecturers

Robert Martínez-Carrasco
rcarrasc@uji.es

I. Abstract

The last 20 years have witnessed a gradual and constant shift in the way society and transnational education institutions, namely the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), conceptualise and address the education/learning activity. That shift in the dominant education paradigm, epistemologically rooted, affects among other stances the role of lecturers, displacing the teaching figure from the centre towards the periphery of the education process. The student-centred narratives in education have a direct impact on lecturers, their self-concept, and the expectations regarding their class contents and methodology. The following paper addresses that concern, advocating for a re-conceptualisation of the role of lecturers under the current student-centred epistemological approach.

Key words: education, learning, epistemology, post-positivism, student-centred education, EHEA, higher education

II. Situating the learning activity: EHEA

The European Higher Education Area has shaken the grounds of tertiary education and has re-modelled degree programmes, classroom methodologies, assessment procedures, and even the very role of students and educators in the overall education process. Some even argue that the word 'education' seems not to be in vogue any longer and other options, namely that of 'training', or 'learning' (Biesta, 2005, 2013a, 2013b; Pachecho Aguilar, 2016) have become the mainstream, *by-default* option among scholars, policy-makers, and educators. These apparently naïve synonyms of the traditional 'education' may cover a shift in the current educational paradigm following a particular post-positivist epistemological narrative protected and fostered by EHEA's approach to all things learning.

It has been almost 18 years since the Bologna Declaration (1999) was signed by 29 participating countries seeking to address the at-the-time segmented picture of the European higher education context. The aim of the project was to co-ordinate the different domestic policies towards «a more complete and far-reaching Europe», as well as to «build upon its intellectual, cultural, social, scientific, and technological dimensions» (Bologna Declaration, 1999: 1-2). A Europe of knowledge, Bologna's undersigning ministers claimed, «was to be an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship».

The whole process had been envisaged a year before on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the University of Paris, and the relevant Education Ministers have been meeting every two years since 1999 in order to evaluate the progress made and put forward measures to build a

cohesive European network of third level education. Those meetings, whose outcome regarding the implementation of the Bologna objectives is included in the corresponding communiqués, have progressively elaborated on aspects such as the mobility of students, lecturers, and researchers, a common degree system, the social dimension of the educational phenomenon, lifelong learning, the ECTS European system of credits, quality assurance, the social dimension of higher education, the development of Europe as an attractive knowledge region, etc. (Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015: 25).

The latest communiqué by the EHEA Education Ministers has been that of Yerevan (2015), where the ministers have acknowledged for the first time that the implementation of the structural reforms since 1999 and the use of the Bologna tools may be uneven and sometimes even inadequately addressed in terms of bureaucracy. Under the uncertain, current economic turmoil, EHEA is believed to face new challenges (youth unemployment, conflicts, extremism, new migration patterns, etc.) leading the ministers to re-arrange the Bologna objectives and re-define the original vision and objectives of the Bologna Process, which, by 2020, should be as follows:

1. **Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching,** supporting pedagogical innovation in *student-centred learning environments* that exploit the benefits of digital technologies for learning and teaching, providing incentives for activities related to creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship and supporting transparent descriptions of learning outcomes and workload, flexible learning paths, appropriate teaching and assessment methods and a collaborative process of curriculum design and quality assurance where students are fully represented.

2. **Fostering the employability of graduates** in the rapidly-changing labour markets by paying special attention to (self-)employment and new job profiles, making sure the students acquire *the relevant competences* in terms of *employability* through dialogue with employers, balancing theoretical and practical input in modules, fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, etc.

3. **Making systems more inclusive** by supporting relevant learning activities in appropriate contexts for different types of learners, including *lifelong learning*, improving gender balance and opportunities for access and mobility for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially from conflict areas (while working to make it possible for them to return home once conditions allow).

4. **Implementing agreed structural reforms** in regards to common degree structure and credit system, common quality assurance standards and guidelines, cooperation for mobility and joint programmes, etc., developing more effective policies for the recognition of credits gained abroad, of qualifications for academic and professional purposes, and prior learning.

The wording of the brand new objectives within EHEA, as one may appreciate, implies a minor turn in the way the original Bologna objectives were phrased, highlighting new concepts such as lifelong learning or employability, all marginally mentioned in the previous communiqués. Rather than structural reforms, which is what the original Bologna declaration aimed for, the 2015 objectives and reforms seem to be socio-professionally and pedagogically oriented, focusing on aspects such as the learning process, entrepreneurship, (self-)employment, employability, competences, dialogue with the relevant employers, etc., constituting what could be seen as a transnational shift regarding the dominant traditional educational paradigm.

From the abovementioned objectives one could infer, in line with EHEA's Working Group on Employability, that the role of lecturers in the education process is «to equip students with the knowledge, skills and competences that they need in the workplace and that employers require» (Working Group on Employability 2009: 5). The way to articulate that, the document continues, would be through «pedagogical innovation in student-centred learning environments».

The claims above lay on the table two central issues in the epistemological debate regarding the 2015 reforms in the European third level education network: the consolidation of the competence construct and, more especially, the shift in the role of the lecturer from the centre of the education process towards the periphery, as we will elaborate below.

III. The central role of competences in current educational discourses

EHEA stands as one of the major platforms fostering the use and application of the competence construct in higher education. The concept itself, that of competences, is neither new nor innovative, and one could trace back works on competence within the academia as far as forty years ago, especially in the field of Human Resources regarding organisational development and personnel management.

The concept itself is rather complex, and over the time it has rendered a myriad of over-lapping, similar and *not-so-similar* definitions put forward from the most varied areas of human knowledge. This 'babelisation' of competences that Edwards-Schachter refers to (2015: 29) makes it a rather complicated task to implement the use of competences in educational settings. Still, the current emerging models of economic and social growth explored by scholars like De Ketele (2008), Biesta (2013), or Dominguez-Milanés (2015:1) stress the need of competences insofar they satisfy a particular market-oriented, results-oriented understanding of professions and communities of practice.

The links between competences and employability, one of the key focuses of post-Yerevan EHEA, may be found on vocational training. As Halász and Michel argue (2011: 289) the use of competences in

educational settings has traditionally and almost exclusively been used in vocational education, since it was thought that that particular form of education had closer links to the labour market and was therefore more professionally-oriented. Given the close relation to employability vocational education had it was easier, then, to formulate its respective learning outcomes in terms of competences, skills, and abilities.

Competences can therefore be seen as the necessary vehicle to bring the labour market closer to university education, an initiative that since the 1990s has replaced the knowledge attainment criteria traditionally used in universities. The subsequent marketisation of higher education entails particular consequences in terms of teaching and learning content and methodology, and also on the very role and position of lecturers.

IV. The 1990s epistemological turn

The central role of competences in educational discourses has been partially fostered by a deeper epistemological shift taking place simultaneously since the late 1980s. Indeed, the 1990s, 2000s, and the current post-positivist scenarios have been characterised by a strong constructivist impulse, in all forms of the constructivist spectrum. The change of perspective from earlier forms of positivism is outstanding, since constructivists believe knowledge to be a temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated construct (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) as opposed to a self-existing entity able to be apprehended. Quite on the contrary, under post-positivist premises, the validity of knowledge is only accepted as long as we find no contradicting evidence failing to represent a given stance of reality.

From that statement follows that the learning activity, that is, knowledge acquisition, has little to do with acquisition. The constructivist knowledge is a matter of transformation of the self and the contextualisation and re-contextualisation of one's own existing ideas and mental representations. Knowledge cannot be received passively, or even be transmitted. Knowledge is constructed, hence the term, by the cognising agent, who has an uttermost active role in the process (von Glasersfeld, 2005).

Pedagogically speaking, the role of the lecturer evolves under this standpoint from a scenario where lecturers are considered an authority, an expert on a particular field whose job is to compartmentalise the relevant knowledge according to the cognitive ability of their students, to a scenario where they can foster cognitive development but do not have the major weigh in the education process.

The main tenets of the major post-positivist epistemology mentioned above, constructivism, following Von Glaserfeld (1984, 1996), do indeed seem to back the statement above and speak of the situated, context-bound, subjective nature of knowledge:

1. Knowledge is not passively accumulated, but rather, is the result of active cognising by the individual.
2. Cognition is an adaptive process that functions to make an individual's behaviour more viable given a particular environment.
3. Cognition organizes and makes sense of one's experience, and is not a process to render an accurate representation of reality.
    1. To those basic pillars of post-positive epistemologies, Doolitle and Hicks (2003) add a fourth tenet:
4. Knowing has roots in both biological/neurological construction, and social, cultural, and language based interactions.

Whether the *locus cognitio*, that is, the specific place where the learning activity occurs, lies within the individual or among the members of a social group is one of the main causes of dispute between radical, trivial, and social constructivists, the main trends within this epistemological approach. Modern classroom settings, though, seem to opt for the latter standpoint and value the application of the social approach to all things constructivist. An indispensable contribution to that concern is that of Vygotsky (1978), who uses the construct of the zone of proximal development in order to address the way cognitive structures are developed within the individual. In his view, individuals are able to develop their cognitive structures through interaction with other individuals (peers, experts) who socialise them into a particular socio-cultural context. That socially shared, context-bound experience is later on construed internally, triggering the relevant cognitive development.

The ZPD allows the educator to identify the actual development level of their students, that is, the activities they can perform either individually or by using the help of their peers, and the level of potential development, which is where, through scaffolding, the educator can provide their students with the relevant food for thought in order for them to develop particular cognitive strategies, skills, etc.

Working on Doolitle and Hicks' characterisation of the construction of knowledge (2003), one could infer a set of pedagogical beliefs and standpoints to be applied in the classroom:

1. The construction of knowledge is a *situated, context-bound activity*, and therefore so is education.
2. The construction of knowledge is fostered by authentic and real-world environments, so the use of *authentic materials and projects* in the classroom should be of much use for lecturers.
3. The construction of knowledge involves social interaction with peers, experts, and the environment surrounding the cognising agent, so the use of *collaborative work* in the classroom should be fostered
4. The construction of knowledge involves the active participation of the cognising agent, their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experience, hence

the need for *student-centred education* where the educator adopts a rather passive role as a facilitator, rather than the supplier of knowledge.

5. The construction of knowledge is fostered by the cognising agents becoming self-regulated, self-mediated, and self-aware, and so education needs to foster *critical thinking skills* among the students by engaging them in multiple perspectives and representations in terms of content, skills, and social aspects, etc.

Still, as Davis and Sumara point out (2004: 125-27) integrating the social nature of the social constructivist epistemology may prove to be tricky when the model put forward places the *locus cognitio* within the individual. On-going learning, they argue, (*ibid*: 127), «seems to be about construal and re-construal of interpretive systems in ways that enable a person to make sense of broader and broader realms of experience», something far from the construction metaphor. The authors blame Piaget's translation into English of the verb «construire» in French, which may be rendered in the sense of 'to construct' but also in the sense of 'to construe' in its biological sense, speaking of complex, fluid structures. The introduction of complexity thinking in the post-positive arena has led many scholars to speak of 'emergentism' (Kiraly, 2006:68), 'complex constructivism' (Doolitle, 2014) or 'neo-Vygotskyan constructivism' as the current epistemological trends guiding the education process. Be what it may, the pedagogical focus of the new epistemological forms introduced lies, as in the other post-positivist epistemologies mentioned above, in the student as an active cognising agent in the education process.

V. The problem of traditional teaching

As we have seen, post-positivist epistemologies have shifted the attention towards the student and their central role in their education process with direct views to their subsequent employability. The main role of lecturers as we have depicted it in this article, under the new paradigm, is to empower students, to scaffold their education process so they, as active cognising agents, can make sense of the world.

The student-centred paradigm has brought along what some scholars have referred to as the 'learnification' of the educational discourses (Biesta, 2013b), where the role of the lecturer has been displaced from their traditional position at the very centre of the <u>education</u> process to the periphery of their student's <u>learning</u> process. A quick look at the relevant literature confirms the increasingly minor, peripheral task lecturers are believed to have in the overall education experience. Some scholars (Kiraly, 2016, for instance) speak of the role of lecturers merely as a part of the 'material and human resources' students should be provided with in order for them to build a solid competence in their respective fields of study.

In any case, the object of this article is not to discredit or criticise post-positivist, namely constructivist, approaches to education. We

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believe wholeheartedly that most of the pedagogical assumptions they imply, especially the ones included above (collaborative work, authenticity of materials, etc.), fit the moment we are living and offer interesting tools and methods to be implemented in the classroom. Instead, this paper stresses the on-going 'learnification' of education insofar it assumes, in a rather prescriptive way, that teaching has evolved into a facilitation act rather than a process whereby any attempt to bring the authoritative teaching figure back to the classroom is deemed as a step backwards in contemporary pedagogy.

Indeed, the current models seem to reject the teaching figure in some degree and think of education in dichotomous terms: pedagogy is understood as either positivist, teacher-centred or post-positivist, student-centred. There seems to be nothing in between, even when out-dated, objectivist stances on education may still be of some use in contemporary educational settings and the reality of education may be exemplified by a range of epistemological stances (Vrasidas, 2000: 359).

Biesta (2013a: 5) blames a number of factors when reflecting on the role of lecturers. The abovementioned epistemological turn is one of them: at the end of the day, it is not an easy task for teachers and educators to have a relevant role in the education process of their students when knowledge acquisition does not depend on their performance regarding the transmission of knowledge but on the active construal of meaning within one's cognition. Other factors mentioned by the scholar are the post-modern fierce critiques of the authoritarian forms of teaching, the democratisation of learning, that is, the fact that increasing numbers of people enrol lifelong and life-wide learning activities, and a number of neo-liberal policies and politics on education conceiving teaching, as opposed to learning, in a rather narrow, authoritarian fashion.

The role of authority and authoritarian teaching seems indeed to be closely linked to the teacher-centred education debate (Biesta, 2016: 375-376) and probably it is in that particular aspect of the debate where some nuances may be introduced in order to re-contextualise and re-conceptualise the role of lecturers and suggest a half-way point. Despite the binary construction on the role of lecturers that seems to exist these days, scholars like Cronjé (2006: 393) explore the possibility of integrating and refining the education act in terms of curriculum design, classroom methodology, and the role of the educator:

«If learning events could combine both perspectives (…) it would follow that the two polar extremes are not opposites, but can be reconceptualised so that high levels of both characteristics can be harmoniously accommodated in one model.»

VI. Bringing the lecturer back to the picture

Biesta (2016: 372) asserts that much of the criticism towards traditional forms of teaching stems from the internalisation of teaching as a form of 'control', since it renders a picture where students can only be depicted as objects of their own education process. That picture stands in full opposition with the dominant post-positivist epistemologies underpinning education, hence the consensus that the only valid manifestation of teaching is that of facilitation, very much aligned with student-centred education.

The predominant, almost exclusive, 'progressive' scaffolding role of lecturers in the overall process poses a problem at many levels, namely related to the very self-concept of the lecturer (What am I?, What am I expected to do? What do I believe my task is?, How do I feel about it?), since educators may or may not accept said displacement and their new attributions and tasks in their classroom regardless of their epistemological views on the role of students in their knowledge acquisition process. Indeed many a lecturer could feel the need, either external or internal, to implement post-positivist elements in their teaching praxis but at the same time reject the idea of their secondary, incidental role in the education of their students.

The question of students becoming subjects of their own education process while educators still remaining in the picture is addressed by Meireu (2007: 84) and stressed by Biesta (*ibid*), and lies on the positivist 'authority' mentioned above becoming *authorised*. Indeed, rather than contemplating the situation as a teacher-subject/student-object situation, the situation could be regarded as a student-subject authorising the role of the lecturer in their education process, letting the educator address them, not in an authoritarian way but rather in an authoritative, authorised way. The student becomes, then, a subject and not an object, insofar they acknowledge their self and are consequently addressed by their lecturer. In those stances, traditional teaching cannot be regarded as purely 'transmissionist' since once exposed to the talk of their lecturers a whole world may happen in the cognition of students: there is not just a passive cognitive retrieval of information but rather countless of options and active triggering of cognitive structures which may unleash the full potential of students, situated at the very centre of their education process. In that sense, the way traditional transmissionist classrooms have been described offers a rather simplistic depiction of the teaching and learning activity since it describes the outside, the appearance of a particular educational setting, but fails to portray the rich, complex cognitive activity of the cognising agents, since the cognitions of those supposed passive retrievers may be undergoing a plethora of mental activities, neurological connexions, and further cognitive development in emerging cognitive structures. Quoting Biesta (2016: 375), «we really should not underestimate our capacity to receive», and neither the active

role of the educator as both a scaffolding agent and a source of experience and knowledge that may be a valuable, unique resource for the student.

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