

Latin American Universities in a Time of Crisis: Responses from the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

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Abstract

Drawing on the Brazilian context, we discuss the crisis facing Latin American Universities, where the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences have been deemed ‘useless’ by populist politicians, who instead favour technicist, neoliberal approaches to education that will produce graduates capable of bolstering a struggling economy. And yet, these disciplines are central to addressing global issues and challenges, and crucial in universities in promoting internationalisation and intercultural collaboration among faculty and students. Paradoxically, covid-19 also offers opportunities for universities in Latin America to internationalise and share resources through the delivery of online programmes, and other virtual exchanges, networks, and collaborations. In this essay, we aim to show how education, embedded in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, and drawing on virtual exchange, can address difference, diversity, marginalisation and exclusion to open up intercultural understanding and communication, especially where young people face conditions of conflict, forced migration, and occupation. Second, we highlight how these forms of education can facilitate intercultural understanding, thereby enhancing critical, participatory, and responsible citizenship in young people. We describe a project, grounded in critical intercultural pedagogy (Freire, 1970), which eschews discourses of competence and employability, and instead involves faculty-student collaboration and coproduction in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences to promote intercultural dialogue. The project included a multinational, multidisciplinary, multilingual researcher and student network in seven universities: three in Latin America as well as one in Palestine, one in the United Kingdom, and two in Turkey. We illustrate our approach through two case studies from the project: an intercultural language learning programme in Colombia, inspired by Boal’s (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* ; and a critical intercultural online exchange using flash fiction, poetry, and identity narratives. Our essay offers inspiration to researchers, teachers of languages and intercultural education, policymakers, and others interested in internationalisation in universities on the value of the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences in promoting international cooperation and understanding within and beyond Latin America.

Resumen

Baseado no contexto brasileiro, discutimos a crise que as universidades latino-americanas enfrentam, onde as artes, as humanidades e as ciências sociais têm sido consideradas "inúteis" por políticos populistas que, em vez disso, favorecem abordagens tecnicistas e neoliberais da educação, que produzirão graduados capazes de apoiar uma economia em dificuldades. No entanto, essas disciplinas são centrais para abordar questões e desafios globais, e de vital importância nas universidades na promoção da internacionalização e colaboração intercultural entre professores e alunos. Paradoxalmente, a pandemia do covid-19 oferece oportunidades para que as universidades da América Latina se internacionalizem e compartilhem recursos por meio da oferta de programas online e outros intercâmbios, redes e colaborações virtuais. Neste ensaio, pretendemos mostrar como a educação, incorporada nas Artes, Humanidades e Ciências Sociais, e fazendo uso de intercâmbio virtual, pode abordar a diferença, a diversidade, a marginalização e a exclusão para ampliar a compreensão intercultural e a comunicação intercultural, especialmente onde os jovens enfrentam condições de conflito, migração forçada e ocupação militar. Em segundo lugar, destacamos como essas formas de educação podem facilitar a compreensão intercultural, aumentando assim a cidadania crítica, participativa e responsável dos jovens. Descrevemos um projeto fundamentado na pedagogia intercultural crítica (Freire, 1970), que evita os discursos de competência e empregabilidade e, ao invés disso, envolve a colaboração e coprodução docente-aluno nas Artes, Humanidades e Ciências Sociais para promover o diálogo intercultural. O projeto incluiu uma rede multinacional, multidisciplinar e multilíngue de pesquisadores e estudantes em sete universidades: três na América Latina além de uma na Palestina, uma no Reino Unido e duas na Turquia. Ilustramos nossa abordagem por meio de dois estudos de caso do projeto: um programa intercultural de aprendizagem de línguas na Colômbia inspirado no *Teatro do Oprimido* de Boal (1979); e uma troca intercultural online crítica usando 'ficção flash,' poemas, e narrativas de identidade. Nosso ensaio oferece inspiração para pesquisadores, professores de línguas e de educação intercultural, para responsáveis por decisões políticas, e outros interessados na internacionalização em universidades sobre o valor das Artes, Humanidades e Ciências Sociais, na promoção da cooperação internacional e da compreensão, dentro e além da América Latina.

Introduction

The current crisis in Latin American Higher Education, particularly but not exclusively in the area of the humanities and social sciences, predates the devastating recent impact of covid-19 on the world's economies and on global mobility. The longer-term downturn in the global economies has impacted disproportionately on the countries of Latin America, with even the bullish economy of Brazil suffering severely, a situation exacerbated by corruption scandals that have implicated the key players in the oil industry and the previous governing party, among others. As with other beleaguered Latin

American countries, the voting public turned to populist leaders who combined a rhetoric of anti-corruption with neo-conservative economic and social policies. In Brazil in 2018, the current President, Jair Bolsonaro, was elected on a pro-militarist, anti-Marxist platform. A substantial part of his support derives from the evangelical Christian churches, whose number of adherents has rapidly grown amongst the Brazilian working classes, giving them considerable political power (Hunter & Power, 2019).

Once in power, Bolsonaro's government quickly moved to reduce the funding to public education, seen as a hotbed of left-wing indoctrination of the young. The Bolsonaro government also supported the *Escola Sem Partido* (School without Party) bill, which was specifically opposed to 'indoctrination' in public schools by teachers influenced by the ideas and teaching strategies of the educator, Paulo Freire (Knijnik, 2020). At higher education level, public universities, state and federal, found their funding cut. While they were not alone in suffering shrinking budgets, humanities and social science faculties were particularly singled out for criticism. In the words of Marine Corde, a Brazilian anthropologist (Chalhoub et al., 2020, p. 4): "[...] humanities and social sciences are still pointed out as useless disciplines. It is a deeply rooted social representation, and this is more or less strongly reflected in the political views of governments".

It is significant, that Corde acknowledges that the antagonism to the humanities and social sciences is a 'deeply rooted social representation' extending beyond the present Bolsonaro government, though exploited by it. The general representation of humanities and social sciences as 'useless' allows governments in numerous regions to justify cuts in funding, particularly at times of crisis. One challenge facing Brazil, Latin America, and humanities and social sciences centres elsewhere, is finding ways of demonstrating that the arts and humanities can and do address global issues and global challenges in ways that the wider population will understand and appreciate.

Challenges to the Internationalisation of Higher Education in Latin America

One of the most immediate impacts of the covid-19 pandemic for Latin American higher education has been the threat to the 'internationalisation' of universities, whatever their place in the world rankings. Internationalisation, while it has multiple definitions, generally refers to the flow of intellectual, human and economic capital, facilitated by the increased global mobility of academic staff and students. The proportion of 'international' staff and students that a higher education institution can boast is one of the key indicators that boost or depress the institution's position in the world rankings. A further indicator is attracting international funding (Proctor & Rumbley, 2018). However, the funding of research in Brazilian public universities outside direct grant awards via state or central government agencies has always been bureaucratically difficult to achieve (Caliari et al., 2020).

In relative terms, Latin American universities have a poor record in internationalisation. For example, according to the 2021 THES World Rankings, the highest ranked university in South America, the University of São Paulo (USP), which lies in the 201-250 band, has only 4% international students, and, while it is rising, its ‘international outlook’ lags behind its ratings for teaching, research, citations or industry income (THES, 2021). For comparison, the current No.1, the University of Oxford, has 41% international students, and its ‘international outlook’ exceeds its income from industry; and the University of Coimbra, ranked in the 601-800 band, still has 18% international students and its international outlook exceeds its scores for research, teaching and industry income. Now, staff and students in Latin America find the opportunities for global mobility restricted, not only by lack of funds, but also the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In this context, internationalisation needs to be redefined: paradoxically, by anticipating the need to reframe what is meant by ‘internationalisation’ in a world where physical travel has become difficult, Latin America may now have the opportunity to lead the way for other countries in the world.

In her survey of successful Brazilian graduate programmes, Ramos (2018) identified numerous strategies then being undertaken, the most popular of which was outward student mobility under the government-funded ‘Science without Borders’ (*Ciências sem Fronteiras*) initiative, which applied only to students in the ‘useful’ exact sciences, and which was discontinued by the Bolsonaro government in 2017. Since outward mobility programs, even when they were being subsidised, only reached a minority of Brazilian students, some institutions had already begun to advocate ‘internationalisation at home’ before the pandemic struck. A central pillar of ‘internationalisation at home’ is the delivery of courses using English-medium instruction (Martinez, 2016; Carvalho Fonseca et al., forthcoming). The broader range of elements of internationalisation include (Ramos, 2018, p. 9): “*mechanisms or strategies* (international mobility, international scientific cooperation, international networks and collaboration, curriculum internationalisation, international engagement in science policy/governance), *academic output* (international publications, international co-authorships, attendance to international scientific meetings and conferences), *enabling factors* (institutional, organisational and administrative support) and *access to resources* (sharing of cutting-edge research facilities and technology, international funding) to *desirable outcomes* (global competence development and scientific capital accumulation)”.

Given that higher education in Brazil has been largely a provider of exchange students to other countries, and that, alongside other actors in the education sector and at all levels worldwide, Brazilian university education has swiftly moved to an online mode of activity, there are, at least in principle, greater opportunities in Brazil for ‘virtual internationalisation’ as universities elsewhere address the accelerated move towards online delivery of programmes, networking, collaboration in publishing, conference participation and sharing of research resources.

These possibilities have been recognised by some senior staff in major Brazilian universities. In one of a series of webinars on the ‘New Normal’ in higher education in the post-coronavirus era, the USP Dean of Research, Professor Carlos Graeff, identified key points learned so far from the Brazilian experience of the pandemic (USP, 2020). Among them, he highlighted the way in which global scientific collaboration around the response to the pandemic has demonstrated the need for ‘Open Science’, which can be defined as the free dissemination of knowledge, subject to aspects of ethics and intellectual property, by means of Open Access to publications, Open Data (access to raw data from the initial stages of research, models and documentation), and Open Computational Process (software and algorithms).

While Open Science is clearly in the public good and it facilitates research collaboration between scientists in Brazil and elsewhere, the prospects for the humanities and social sciences, already bleak before covid-19, seem bleaker. Squeezed by an unsympathetic federal government, typically more individually oriented in their research agendas than their collaborative colleagues, less positivist in their theoretical frameworks and methods, and often valuing modes of dissemination that are not subsidised by project funding (e.g. traditional formats such as printed books), those who work in the humanities and social sciences will again need to be creative in order to thrive and win public respect in the difficult months and years ahead.

The Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences as Responses to the Crisis

Against this backdrop, we initiated a multinational, multidisciplinary, multilingual network project, that brought together researchers in three universities in Latin America (University of São Paulo, Brazil; University of Andes, Colombia; and the Instituto Federal Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil) and four other universities (Anadolu University, Istanbul University, Turkey; Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine; and Durham University, United Kingdom). The project, led from Durham University, benefited from funding from United Kingdom Research Innovation, specifically, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Global Challenges Research Fund.¹ The project responds to several issues raised above concerning the crisis in Latin American universities.

First, the project addresses the challenges faced in many Latin American universities concerning the relevance of the arts, humanities, and the social sciences. We maintain that these disciplines remain crucial in preparing graduates for a complex and uncertain future, not least in their willingness to tackle global challenges imaginatively, and to critique the reductive neoliberal discourses of competence and employability. Second, the project repositions internationalisation in Latin America, and beyond, by engaging private and state/federal universities and their faculty and students, through

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researcher collaboration with universities in other parts of the world. Finally, it promotes intercultural dialogue among students in higher education and young people excluded from it who are in challenging contexts due to conflict, forced migration, and occupation.

The project had the following two broad aims: How can forms of education embedded in the arts and humanities address difference, diversity, marginalisation and exclusion to open up intercultural understanding and communication, especially where young people face conditions of conflict, forced migration, and occupation? How can these forms of education facilitate intercultural understanding, thereby enhancing critical, participatory, and responsible citizenship in young people?

The researchers and educators, in five case study sites (in Bogota; Natal/Gaza; Istanbul; Anadolou; and Durham) worked with students and refugees (supported by non-governmental organisations, charities, and other community groups) to co-construct critical intercultural pedagogies (Freire, 1970). The case studies drew on creative arts and new materialist methods (Badwan, 2020; Frimberger, 2016; Harvey et al., 2019) that involved sharing narratives of the self; languages instruction and exchange; ethno-religious music that drew on new and traditional forms of representation and identity; participatory photography; deconstruction of media discourses and representations of refugees and asylum seekers; and creative writing (flash fiction and autobiography). Through face-to-face workshops and online meetings, the students and young people (guided by the researchers) engaged in dialogic intercultural encounters to develop understandings of one another's' languages, culture and cultural heritage, multiple identities, and representations. These co-constructed, locally-generated, and context-specific intercultural pedagogies enabled young people to share educational experience which fostered language learning, intercultural dialogue, equitable quality education and lifelong learning. Together, the intercultural pedagogies developed through the five case studies (see the project website <https://biphec.wordpress.com/>) aimed to promote participation and responsibility in the community and public sphere, in response to the UNESCO 2030 education strategy and Sustainable Development Goal 4, in formal and non-formal education.

The project also brought together researchers from multiple disciplines (anthropology, applied linguistics, education, ethno-religious and music studies, languages education, and sociology) to enrich understandings of internationalisation and intercultural education, and in particular, to decentre research theories and methodologies developed in the Global North. The researchers drew on decolonising approaches to researcher practices through Freirean intercultural pedagogy (Freire, 1970), whereby researchers work *with* and *for* the research participants (not *on* or *about* them) with an aim to decentre and question their own power in the research process and resist hegemonic narratives (Ladegaard & Phipps 2020; Smith, 1999/2012; Walsh & Mignolo, 2018).

Two of the case studies from the project involved researchers from Latin America. The first, led by Dr Beatriz Peña Dix at the University of Los Andes and supported by Professor John Corbett

from the University of São Paulo, investigated the role of pre-service language teachers as multilingual mediators. Drawing on critical pedagogy, and in particular, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), the researchers explored how drama and theatre games empowered student recipients of the Colombian government's scholarship programme "It pays to be clever" (*Ser Pilo Paga*) to create their own intercultural English language education resources for mediation in conflict situations resulting from civil war. The lead researcher supported students to develop learning resources using dramatic improvisations based on their own and their students' experiences, approached literally or metaphorically through critical incidents. The case study was guided by the main question: "How do pre-service language teachers understand critical intercultural pedagogies as transformative intercultural language education in contexts of conflict?" The 20 students, who were enrolled in an undergraduate teacher education degree at a private university in Bogota, participated in three workshops:

- 1) intercultural approaches and drama strategies in English language teaching;
- 2) intercultural pedagogies, dialogue and mediation; and
- 3) designing a toolbox to prompt critical intercultural pedagogies in the English language classroom.

As an outcome of the final phase, they created and refined activities to foster intercultural dialogue and reflection around their own or imaginary intercultural encounters that involved conflict. Students invited their former English language teachers (from their secondary schools) to participate in a co-teaching experience called "The Mirror Project" in which they collaborated in teaching some of the activities previously designed. The case study reviews Boal's (1979) pedagogical principles and their local adaptation. The case study then draws on the tasks designed by the students, their journal entries, and interviews with the researcher, to explore how the students developed an understanding of critical intercultural pedagogies, the creation of third spaces, and mediation and dialogue in intercultural encounters. The emergent intercultural pedagogies developed by the students may inform language education stakeholders (e.g., pre-service and in-service language teachers, language teacher trainers, language teacher education programs, and the Ministry of Education's language teaching policy developers) on the use of critical intercultural pedagogies in English language education as resources for the mediation of conflict in contexts of war and other civil conflicts.

The second case study involves researchers at the Instituto Federal Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil (Dr Bruno Ferreira di Lima, Professor Janaina Weissheimer), and researchers at the Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine (Professor Nazmi Al Masri and Dr Refaat Alreer). The case study, by connecting students at their respective universities in Brazil and Palestine, sought to develop a critical and creative intercultural pedagogy of resistance and resilience. The case study focused on two creative projects that explored identity, resilience, and resistance. At the Instituto Federal Rio Grande do

Norte, trainee language teachers were taught to write ‘flash non-fiction’ in English to explore their own identity and experience of life in the economically marginalised north-east of Brazil. Meanwhile, in an intensive creative writing training course held at the Islamic University of Gaza, male and female graduates from the English department were trained and encouraged to write both short stories and poetry in English in response to the ongoing state of crisis in Palestine. The two groups were brought together in an online intercultural exchange in which they shared their work, then participated in a ‘live’, synchronous online meeting. The case study addresses the techniques used to train the students to write fiction and non-fiction in their different educational contexts, the themes and issues that arose out of the students’ writing, and the impact of engaging online with a particular audience from a different culture, with a different experience of marginalisation and crisis.

The engagement among researchers in Latin America and elsewhere in the Global South facilitated two further strands of investigation. The first concerns the role of languages in the research process. The network has enabled researchers to investigate processes of translation, language and communication among researchers, educators, experts, non-professional translators and community groups with the aim of enriching understandings of multilingual researcher methods and processes (“researching multilingually”) (Holmes et al., 2013). This investigation opens up debates about the role of indigenous languages, Spanish, other Latin American languages, and the dominance of English in education, internationalisation, and research, including languages of publication. The project raised issues for the researchers concerning the advantages and challenges of having English as a common language of inquiry and action; while certain aspects of collaboration were certainly enabled, the project also introduced the Latin American researchers and students to some unexpected linguistic demands and opportunities, such as the necessity for Syrian refugees in Istanbul to learn Turkish for academic purposes, and the creative uses of English by Palestinians in Gaza to ‘write back’ against oppression. The researchers, from diverse geographical backgrounds, also shared concerns and strategies for their own scholarly development in globalised academia, whereby, for career advancement and recognition, they are increasingly expected to publish high quality outputs through the medium of English.

Second, we explore the benefits of a multilingual, multidisciplinary, multinational network in enhancing researcher development, collaboration, and shared/unshared researcher approaches that recognise and value knowledge forms and research methods emergent in the Global South, and in particular, in Latin America. The outcomes of these investigations will be published in an edited research monograph which discusses the five case studies and the affordances and challenges of the transnational, multilingual, multidisciplinary network; and includes contributions from three other

scholars working within and on Latin American issues in intercultural education² (Holmes & Corbett, forthcoming).

Conclusions

The project has demonstrated the importance and value of international collaborations with scholars from Latin America. Together, we have sought to decentre and decolonise research processes in order to generate research based on Latin American and other Global South forms of knowledge. This knowledge, grounded in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and evidenced in the critical intercultural pedagogies, is crucial in enabling educators to work with students and people in the community on global issues and challenges in ways that resonate with their own identity and belonging, and especially in contexts of conflict and forced migration where higher education may be inaccessible. Our work underscores the arts, humanities, and social sciences as key areas for intercultural learning and understanding, and in promoting intercultural dialogue concerning current societal crises ushered in by populism and far-right ideologies, racism, climate change, and the covid-19 pandemic. The project also demonstrates that internationalisation does not have to be about chasing university rankings; instead, it marks the value and importance of international researcher collaborations in shaping methods of learning that reach out to the many in Latin America for whom higher education can be an imagined future only.

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