MOVING TOWARDS FREIREAN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: REDEFINING COMPETENCE-BASED CURRICULA THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS RESISTANCE TO THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SPAIN

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Abstract:

The neoliberalization of higher education in Spain has been consolidating through its integration process to the European Higher Education Area. In this context, competence-based curricula have become an instrument to create a model of education and citizenship in which market values override solidarity, justice and community well-being. There is, however, still room to shift the teaching-learning space. Using Freirean critical pedagogy to redefine the curriculum through the implementation of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the classroom provides a methodological approach within and despite current EHEA policies to revert the neoliberalization of higher education.

Key words:

Critical pedagogy, neoliberalism, competences, participatory action research, Paulo Freire

Resumen:

La neoliberalización de la educación superior en España se ha ido consolidando a través de su proceso de integración al Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (EEES). En este contexto, los planes de estudio basados en competencias se han convertido en un instrumento para crear un modelo educativo y de ciudadanía en la que los valores de mercado prevalecen sobre la solidaridad, la justicia y el bienestar comunitario. Sigue habiendo, sin embargo, margen para cambiar el espacio de enseñanza-aprendizaje. El uso de la pedagogía crítica de Freire para redefinir el plan de estudios a través de la implementación de la Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP) en el aula ofrece un enfoque metodológico que, a pesar de las políticas actuales del EEES, permite revertir la neoliberalización de la educación superior.

Palabras clave:

Pedagogía crítica, neoliberalismo, competencias, investigación-acción participativa, Paulo Freire

1. INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism is a systemic cycle where individuality is fostered to the detriment of the community (the local and the global); "as a consequence, we have oppression, manipulation, exploitation and human misery" (Nikolakaki, 2011: 48). These forms of violence – exercised to a great extent towards women and minorities – become normalized through media in a context where extremism and xenophobic discourses are flourishing both in Europe and around the globe (Van Dijk, 2008). During our years of teaching in Higher Education, we have witnessed the silence and the compliance of our students – and our colleagues – as they "look the other way" failing to address many of these concerning issues within university space[1]. The lack of awareness about these

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[1] A clear example of how this is present in our classroom is that when discussing the topic of migration in relation to course content, students do not know about the existence of immigrant detention centers. Neither do they know that there is one in Barcelona, only a few kilometers away from their homes. These centers imprison and criminalize persons under inhumane living conditions, after being raided and persecuted regardless of their material or emotional ties to the territory. According to the report of the European Commission *The use of detention and alternatives to detention in the context of immigration policies*, available online, there were 92,575 detentions in 2013 alone in 128 facilities in 24 countries of the European Union. However, this number is inconsistent with NGO reports on specific country data. For example, in Spain, the Global Detention Project identifies 10 facilities in use in 2013, while the European Commission report only identifies 8 detention centers
(http://www.globaldetentionproject.org/fileadmin/docs/Spain_Detention_Profile_2013.pdf).
Different NGOs complain about the opacity of data concerning detention policy, enforcement and regulation (The Global Detention Project, The Jesuit Refugee Service, The Spanish Commission of Support to Refugees - CEAR, etc.). Eurostat, for example, does not supply statistics on detention practices, and only provides numbers for "apprehended and deported non-citizens." The CEAR report on the situation of detention centers in Spain of 2009 (http://oppenheimer.mcgill.ca/IMG/pdf/CEAR.pdf) gave detailed accounts of the extreme violation of human rights suffered by the imprisoned migrants, which include asylum seekers, pregnant women, elderly people and children. In most Spanish facilities there is no segregation of criminal and administrative detainees, tortures have been reported on behalf of staff as well as lack of adequate medical attention. The detention center in Barcelona has the capacity for 263 persons, but has held over 1,600 inmates at given periods. According to the Global Detention Project, "between 2004 and 2007, 370,000 persons were deported [in Spain]; an increase of 43.4 per cent compared to the previous four-year period." These persons are considered "illegal" just for the fact of being. There is an extremely scary resemblance between the migrant raids and their imprisonment in detention centers today and the terrors committed against Jewish and Roma communities by the Nazis. Paradoxically, the detention center in Barcelona is in the port, where tons of imported goods are shipped in, in many cases, from the lands of those who are persecuted, incarcerated and deported against their will to a place where they were once born; a land which, in many cases, has been sacked and exploited ruthlessly by companies and

injustices on the part of our students is a particular symptom of the perversity of the neoliberal system which directly influences our teaching. We worry about how the neoliberal context in general, and the neoliberalization of Higher Education in particular, is drawing us further from our values in our practice. As Henry Giroux (2009: 1) stated; "there is little interest in understanding the pedagogical foundation of higher education as a deeply civic and political project that provides the conditions for autonomy and takes liberation and the practice of freedom as a collective goal".

In this article, we examine the neoliberalization of higher education in Spain. We focus on the imposition of the competence-based curriculum as an instrument of domination/subordination and reproduction of the *status quo*. In such a context, we recognize ourselves as oppressed in our teaching practice. Hence, it is not our intention to free our students from their neoliberal preconceptions; we cannot. What we can try to do is find an alternative for ourselves, and in doing so, we might be contributing to finding an alternative with our students and colleagues. The route we propose is to redefine the imposed competence-based curriculum through Participatory Action Research (PAR) based on Freirean critical pedagogy – within and despite the given frame. In this article we share what has been our form of emancipatory activism within our teaching practice.

2. NEOLIBERALISM AND COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SPAIN

2.1. The Neo-liberal Agenda for Higher Education

"Most universities are now dominated by instrumentalist and conservative ideologies, hooked on methods, slavishly wedded to accountability measures, and run by administrators who lack both a broader vision and an understanding of education as a force for strengthening the imagination and expanding democratic public life. One consequence is that a concern with excellence has been removed from matters of equity, while higher education once conceptualized as a public good has been reduced to a private one…" (Giroux, 2010: 1)

Markets have taken over higher education; funding, accountability and evaluation

governments who control those markets where we – teachers and students – consume, work and in general, live.

methods in higher education have been put at the service of markets over community needs throughout the European Higher Education Area (Aubert & García, 2009; Canaan, 2013; Cascante Fernández, 2009; Freire, 2012; Sanz Fernández, 2006). Furthermore, education has become a product of consumption where competitive effort is rewarded by the acquisition of material goods and status, where individuality is fostered and equality is seen as an obstacle to progress. This has an inevitable effect on curricula, both in terms of content and regarding teaching methodology (Cascante Fernández, 2009; Nikolakaki, 2011).

The context for Spanish Higher Education has been no different during the past couple of decades. Particularly, in recent years, the transformation of higher education in Spain has been marked by its adaptation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where the social dimension of learning has been approached through a concept of "active citizenship" closer to "doing your job" than to being political about your job, its implications and its surroundings (Alonso, Fernández Rodríguez, & Nyssen, 2008). Despite the mention of the social dimension of education in European Higher Education frameworks, the EU Modernization Agenda for Higher Education[2] focuses mostly on the professionalization and standardization of teaching and learning content where market-based values override socially-aware perspectives and the ethical considerations of over-professionalization (Alonso et al., 2008; Wanggren & Milatovic, 2014).

EU and Spanish neoliberal education policies have introduced methods of quasi-markets into the Spanish Higher Education system. Funding resources provided by the state are completed by students (through tuition fees) and by businesses, both of which become clients of the university system[3]. Universities become providers which must fulfill the demands of the clients. The state is still the main funder of Spanish public Higher Education, but universities are increasingly required to find other sources of funding (Cascante Fernández, 2009). Those centers which do not comply with standards of quality and productivity lose both clients and funding, while centers which do comply with these requirements gain the necessary accreditation and status to maintain funding sources, both from the state and from clients. Competences, as indicated by the EHEA framework, have become a "good road" for such standardization, which in turn allows for the optimization of the education market (Cascante Fernández, 2009: 137).

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[2] Document available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf.

[3] According to data of 2012 from the National Statistics Institute (INE, www.ine.es), private funding reached nearly 20% of public university expenditure.

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2.2. Competences as a Mechanism of Neoliberalization

Competences have been defined by a broad range of authors. In general, there seems to be an agreement on competences being the result of a multidimensional process of acquiring knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values given a complex reality. While some authors focus on the measurement and evaluation of those results (García García & Arranz, 2010: 113; García San Pedro, 2010: 43), others highlight the need for intellectual curiosity, logical reasoning, effective communication, teamwork, information management, personal ethics and tolerance (Hager & Holland, 2002: 3), as well information networks, relational networks and know-how (Le Boterf, 2000: 27).

The adaptation of the European Higher Education Area policies in Spain has revolved around the implementation of "competences" as the basic unit of teaching-learning under a student-centered paradigm. In the context of Spanish Higher Education, competences are conceptualized as having a complex, global, holistic and reflexive nature, promoting the gradual development of the commitment of the student with his/her learning in relation to an increased consciousness about the world and its possibilities (García San Pedro, 2010: 57). However, a discourse based on competences for the development and standardization of professional profiles leads to the construction of an evaluation framework based on indicators, which centers the teaching model on the product and the result of learning and not on the process of teaching-learning.

The National Agency for the Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation (ANECA) has been the entity responsible for guiding, implementing and monitoring competence-based curricula for all degrees following European Commission dictates. *The White Book* published by ANECA details the corresponding competences for each degree. Competences in the White Book have been defined according to the Tuning Project[4], a European project which created the basis for EHEA harmonization based on compatibility of competences throughout the same or similar degrees around the European Higher Education Area (Bolívar, 2006). Competences are classified into general competences and specific competences, where general competences are applicable to all degrees and specific competences are defined according to professional profiles, in accordance with particular theoretical content and practical and experimental abilities. Professional profiles have been determined on the basis of what the EHEA has marked as necessary for the adequate exercise of the profession, in a sort of acritical "only-path" to follow (Bolívar, 2006: 6). Furthermore, the Tuning Project identifies 31 general

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[4] For more information about the Tuning Project see http://www.unideusto.org/tuning/ .

competences, but only five explicit socially-aware skills: "ability to show awareness of equal opportunities and gender issues, ability to act on the basis of ethical reasoning, ability to act with social responsibility and civic awareness, appreciation of and respect for diversity and multiculturality, and commitment to the conservation of the environment". The other 26 competences are more related to individual abilities such as learning a second language, ability to generate new ideas or ability to design projects[5]. These 26 competences can be instrumentalized to create more "efficient professionals" (Bolivar, 2006). However, the possibility of explicitly linking these competences to an understanding of society which goes deeper than market values and needs, fall upon the intentionality of the university direction and/or teacher at the moment of further specifying the curriculum.

The ambiguity of what these general competences require on the part of both the teacher and the student is necessary for its applicability in the heterogeneous European territories. Nonetheless, this ambiguity allows these competences to be defined by a context where they are in the service of a specific way of understanding the social, which has been shaped and interpreted through neoliberal understandings of ethics, responsibility, civic society and diversity (Wanggren & Milatovic, 2014: 32). Teaching in Spanish Higher Education has been reduced in recent years to this list of competences which resembles the training and recruiting processes of human resources in the entrepreneurial world (Bolívar, 2006: 18). Teachers in Spain expressed their concern on the matter early on in the EHEA integration process, particularly in a University Teacher Manifesto in which they worry "that under the understanding that Universities must attend to social demands – with a clearly reductionist viewpoint of what society is – in reality university is placed at the exclusive service of companies and the only training addressed is that which is required by the market" (Bolívar, 2006: 18).

The use of curricular programs based on competences offers advantages for the advancement of neoliberal policies. Competences can be evaluated numerically, can be easily used to establish comparisons between students, teachers, centers and overall achievement scores between territories. This increases the possibilities of business and profit-making within Higher Education. Standardization is necessary for the

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[5] For more information about the Tuning general competences see http://www.unideusto.org/tuning/, as well as the Tuning Sectoral Framework for Social Sciences which provides a detailed description, and is available at http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/images/stories/sectoral_framework/2007_10347_FR_Tuning_SQF_PUBLIC_PART.pdf .

mercantilization of the HE sector, where companies find a highly profitable system of production of human capital on one hand, and of consumers on the other (Cascante Fernández, 2009: 139). The curriculum based on competences completes a context in which education is increasingly linked to the entrepreneurial processes of funding, accountability and standardization, and where individuality and effort-based competitiveness are encouraged over values of solidarity and empathy (Cascante Fernández, 2013: 49).

2.3. The Competence-based Curriculum

Competences are geared towards providing a link between the formative and the professional world. Competence-based learning is linked to a constructivist teaching-learning methodology, through the reinforcement of the active role of the student in his/her learning process. Constructivism fosters autonomy and initiative in the student, based on self-regulated learning and instructional strategies such as interdisciplinary and group work, as well as student-centered control. In the constructivist conception, learning is the result of a process of complex functional exchanges between the student that learns, the knowledge object of learning and the teacher who helps give sense to such knowledge (Meneses Benítez, 2007: 142). Although constructivism in based on the sociocultural and learning theories of Lev Vygotsky and the genetic theory of Jean Piaget, among others, it is important to state that Vygotsky's and Piaget's epistemological basis for constructivist teaching have been essential in the development of theories of education. They provide general frameworks for the teaching practice, hence it is predominantly the context, the intentionality, and the formats of teaching, rather than constructivism in itself, which conditions the learning-teaching space towards a practice of neoliberalism (Cascante Fernández, 2009)[6].

Constructivist teaching methodologies have been consolidated within the European Higher Education Area to form a model where knowledge is constructed from experience, student motivation is key, and the teacher is responsible for offering students

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[6] Constructivism has been indispensable in the development of Freirean critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire explains in his text Pedagogy of Hope, where he revisits his *pedagogy of the oppressed*, how Piaget was one of his basic references for developing his initial approaches to education (Freire, 1992:42). Hence, in this article we do not pretend to analyze constructivism as a teaching methodology, since that would exceed the purpose and object of this paper. However, the competence-based teaching model is linked in the literature to the constructivist methodology, but it is in no way exhaustive of the possibilities and influence of constructivism in other pedagogical schools of thought. Taking this into account, we explore the instrumentalization of the European competence-based teaching model and its application to Spanish higher education for the consolidation of neoliberal policies.

the different representations of reality that will allow them to grasp its complexity (Meneses Benítez, 2007). Although students must construct their own significant knowledge through tasks and projects in processes of self-regulated learning, teachers are responsible for giving students access to the tools, the information and the resources to complete these tasks. They must also determine the depth in which students have acquired the knowledge and abilities (the competences), evaluate their learning process and give them feedback for improvement and bettering of their future results. Methodologies based on self-regulated learning include collaborative learning, learning assisted by other students, learning based on problems, learning based on projects, research-based learning, and work integrated learning, among others; in which students must be autonomous, authorized and supervised in their learning process (Bernabeu Tamayo, 2009: 95). To achieve this, the learning process must (Bernabeu Tamayo, 2009: 83): be centered on and lead by the student; be defined according to a start, development and results; be based on contents available in the student's context; be based on real problems and research; be sensitive to local culture; be based on specific objectives related to the standards of the curriculum; achieve learning objectives; interrelate the academic, real and professional worlds; give feedback and evaluation by experts, based on reflection and self-evaluation by the student, which must be measurable and based on learning evidences such as portfolios, diaries, final presentations, etc.

These characteristics assigned to the constructivist model in the context of the EHEA, sets it as the main methodology for the implementation of the competence-based curriculum, where self-regulated learning validated by the teacher becomes the basic form through which the neoliberal subjectivity is implanted within the student (Vassallo, 2012). According to Freirean pedagogy, adaptation, prescription and relationships of dependence are associated with subordination and domination (Freire, 1970, 2004). Highly valued competences in the EHEA educational model are related to abilities to innovate, problem-solve, self-direct, work with others, and adapt: all competences necessary for high productivity within the markets (Vassallo, 2012: 564).

> "Teaching students to self-regulate their learning aligns with the neoliberal logic to produce adaptable, self-interested, responsibilized individuals so they can operate within environments that are characterized by choice, competition, and personalized learning... In addition, the selves of SRL are not unlike neoliberal subjectivity. The neoliberal subject is a rational

competitor in the marketplace, driven by self-interest and betterment as pursued and rationalized through an economic logic of productivity and efficiency. The neoliberal self strives for autonomy, fulfillment, and meaning by strategically deliberating over choices that can optimize personal value. Life outcomes are treated as a matter of personal responsibility and one's life is a project that is never complete." (Vassallo, 2012: 568–572)

The implicit teaching of the neoliberal subjectivity leads to the rise of the rational self to the detriment and stigmatization of the communal self, which is not committed to an ethic of self-improvement without considering the relational structures within a context. Self-regulated learning, as sought by the competence-based model within the EHEA in general and in Spain in particular, "encourages individuals to think of themselves as self-interested, and individualistic... tied instrumentality to oneself and others... [and] disconnected from the kinds of communal involvements that engender strong moral and social ties... [This] can be restrictive of ontological possibilities, and can be implicated in invalidating, marginalizing, and pathologizing communal identities" (Vassallo, 2012: 573).

It is important to redefine competences by asking "what is 'effective ' performance? Who sets performance indexes or proficiency levels? Does everybody in society have equal access and opportunities to attain these so-called proficiency levels? What constitutes a 'good' work? ... Whose voice is heard and whose is silenced? Whose values are promoted and whose are marginalized?" (Chege, 2009: 229–230)

Accepting the current pedagogical framework based on a competence-based curriculum which is mostly at the service of the neoliberal agenda, gives the impression that education is apolitical – neutral – because there is no questioning of the political character in which such education is framed, nor the intentionality behind it. "Depoliticizing" education by excluding communal subjectivities implies the establishment of an order of power, which, in a manner that resembles positivistic universality, sets up "truths" which are not to be questioned (students *have to* get good grades; I *have to* keep my job; my degree *has nothing* to do with politics; attendance is mandatory, evaluation is necessary, and a long etcetera of reproduced mandates...).

Student-consumers and university staff-providers adapt and work towards the objectives set by the higher authority in search of a unification of demand and offer of human capital in the neoliberal markets as seen in Figure 1. The consequences in Spain of this mercantilization which is implemented at both subjective and contextual levels of Higher Education are legitimately worrying in terms of increasing inequalities (Sanz

Fernández, 2006). According to the Spanish Ministry of Education publication titled *Basic Data of the University System 2013-2014*, in most Spanish territories the price of degrees has doubled – and nearly tripled in Catalunya – during the last ten years. Simultaneously, student registration has seen a drop of nearly 10% during the same period, reaching a decrease in enrollment of between 20% and 30% in Science degrees, for which tuition fees are generally higher than in the Social Sciences and Humanities (Secretaría General de Universidades, 2014).

Figure 1: Systemic Representation of Neoliberalism in Higher Education

(see Figure 1 at the end)

It is at this point that it becomes essential to question our university model and our role as teachers within this model. In this sense, "critical pedagogy counters traditional paradigms such as the great divide and the functional approach by exposing and challenging the agenda behind depoliticizing literacy. It also overcomes the limitations of post-structural and discourse approaches by adopting an educational theory grounded on situating the education process in the socio-political milieu and, most importantly, providing praxis grounded on empowerment of educators and students to challenge inequalities in education and social injustices in society in general" (Chege, 2009: 232).

3. FREIREAN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

3.1. Redefining the Problem from the Teacher's Point of View

"Do not rush into solving a problem before asking yourself, for whom is it a problem, who has defined the problem and why am I the one to solve it." (Hernández, 2010: 9) In our experience, Spanish Higher Education has become an oppressive system for those who "resist being drawn into the neoliberal web that spins notions of 'rights' and 'responsibilities' that are not necessarily [ours] or those of [our] students, [and who] resist the pressures to conform to the demands of rigid schemes of work and prescribed behavioral learning outcomes that are linked to specified assessment criteria, neither of which are [ours]" (Gale, 2010: 306). We wish for our students and for ourselves a teaching-learning space different from what Paulo Freire described as banking education. Banking education is described as a system of knowledge transmission where the educator educates, knows, thinks, speaks, disciplines, chooses, acts, and defines contents, values and behaviors through the exercise of authority, while students are

confined to passivity as objects of the teaching-learning process (Freire, 1970: 53, 2004). In Freire's description of banking education, the educator enforces an oppressive exercise of power by neglecting the voice of the students, and thus dehumanizing them into mere objects. This, however true, lies in a more complex system of interactions which must be acknowledged in order to transform banking education into a practice of pedagogy in which neither ourselves, nor our students are left voiceless and denied agency. "The dominant culture of working life within the university frequently is that of research-based publishing output and grant-capture. It is the research-led nature of universities, particularly those in the most socially elite higher education sub-sectors, that inevitably shapes career paths and incentives for individuals and that defines the ethos of departments across all disciplines… It is simply to acknowledge that in the work-a-day practice of departments, it can be difficult to establish widening participation [among students]" (O'Brien, 2013: 242). In the current Higher Education context, teaching liberating pedagogy can become quite a challenge for educators, not only because of binding curriculum objectives and mandates from university governing bodies, but also because students themselves are often resistant to alternative forms of pedagogy (Canaan, 2013; Chege, 2009; DeLeon, 2006; Gale, 2010; Rouhani, 2012).

Before attempting to transform banking education, we must first analyze the prescriptions that we as teachers receive for our teaching, since we are no longer the sole deciders of what and how to teach (Freire, 2004). This is relevant because, according to Freire, only the oppressed can change their own reality through a process of self-awareness (Freire, 1970). Hence, we cannot consider our students as oppressed and ourselves as their liberators – even if it is out of our desire to empower them – because not only are we oppressed ourselves, but because not attempting our own liberation through our teaching would result in merely giving banking education a face-wash (Chege, 2009). "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding" (Freire, 1970: 95). There must be space for students to have a legitimized voice, but in order to do so we must first analyze ourselves and our own practice and be willing to share this reflection with our students. "It would be irresponsible to ask students to share their experiences and reflections, to make students vulnerable, if the teacher is not willing to do the same" (Chege, 2009: 234).

Until we move the focus of oppression from our students to our own practice, we will not be able to identify alternatives to free ourselves, so that in freeing ourselves we can free the other (Freire, 1970, 2004).It is important to identify ourselves as oppressed –

which means recognizing the power structure in which our practice is embedded in order to find alternatives of praxis. In this sense, we must acknowledge that we are not only the reproducers of banking education because most of us have ourselves grown up under such a model, but also because we are the recipients of prescriptions that we are expected to enforce through an imposed set of criteria in the shape of a curriculum. We will only be able to transform our way of teaching when we find an alternative of praxis within and despite our own neoliberal subjectivities and the prescriptions of what our teaching should be. The problem, then, is the oppression we feel when a curriculum is imposed on our practice with predetermined content, formats, skills, behaviors and values, and which is contrary to our own values as teachers, and as citizens. This is a problem for all teachers who resist becoming mere spokespeople for the reproduction of neoliberalism because they have experienced, at one point or another, others forms of learning which have inspired them. It is not the purpose of this article to propose an alternative to free our students, but rather to contribute to the practice of a more liberating pedagogy for all subjects involved, especially us, teachers, with the hope that it might directly influence our teaching-learning spaces, challenge the status-quo, and snowball into a more just and solidary society.

3.2. Freirean Critical Pedagogy and Its Importance to Fight Neoliberalism from within the Classroom

Critical pedagogy has been developed by numerous authors. However, we will focus on the Freirean approach to critical pedagogy for various reasons. Firstly, not all critical pedagogy – based on the development of critical thinking skills – is necessarily linked to the social transformation of the self and of the community (Chege, 2009). Freirean critical pedagogy goes beyond the "critical" to emphasize the political nature of education, inviting a reflection on power structures within our teaching-learning contexts to transform education into a "pragmatic and political art" (Arnett, 2002: 490). Critical thinking in itself is not enough to construct solidary and communal subjectivities, since it can be instrumentalized following the rational self into a neoliberal understanding of what critical thinking is and should be. In this sense, competences for the development of critical thinking are necessary but are not sufficient under a Freirean pedagogical perspective. Secondly, Freire invites "learning under hostile conditions" (Arnett, 2002: 490), which could be considered the context in which Higher Education is currently framed. Thirdly, in the case of Spain, critical pedagogy has been addressed through action-research. This has predominantly been based on the text *Becoming Critical* by Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, which has resulted in an accommodated practice

where action-research and critical pedagogy have been deprived of their political roots in effecting real social change within and outside the teaching-learning arena. "We could quote numerous current examples in [Spain] where action-research appears (using the authors we have mentioned as reference: Stenhouse, Elliot, Carr, Kemmis, Habermas, etc.) as an adequate instrument in the framework of human capital theories and competence-based curricula" (Cascante Fernández, 2013: 49). The consequence in the case of Spain has been a stagnated development of critical pedagogy which must be rethought and re-launched. All of the aforementioned reasons explain the need to redefine critical pedagogy from a Freirean perspective, taking into account the actual binding framework in which teachers find themselves today in Higher Education.

3.3. Freirean Critical Pedagogy and Participatory Action Research

Freirean critical pedagogy and Participatory-Action Research (PAR) are based on various epistemological concepts. Firstly, people can never be objects of a process, they must always be subjects. All persons can teach and learn, are owners of some knowledge, have the same right to speak, be heard, and propose options, contents, problems and solutions. Secondly, reflection and action must go together in a process of increasing self-awareness: awareness of ourselves as part of a community and awareness of the structures which bind such community. As stated by Freire, it is *consciousness as consciousness of consciousness*. Thirdly, the basis of the teaching-learning-researching experience is dialogical relationships. Dialogical relationships are based on faith, humility, love, trust, critical thinking, and hope for all subjects involved in the teaching-learning process. The content of learning-teaching-researching should be spurred from such a dialogue, in what Freire names "thematic investigation circles". In this context, the process becomes "an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others" (Freire, 1970: 89). This leads into the basis of Participatory Action Research, which is a reflection-action spiral in which all persons involved in the research have the ability to propose and redefine the research itself. We can define Freirean critical pedagogy in Freire's own words:

> "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on 'authority' are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no

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one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are 'owned ' by the teacher" (Freire, 1970: 80).

Graphically, we can express the difference between Freirean critical pedagogy and the competence-based teaching model as seen in Figure 2, where we can observe that given the same elements in terms of space, persons and constructed forms of knowledge, with a shift in the concept of authority within the teaching-learning space we can re-define the flows of legitimated knowledge and power.

Figure 2. Competence-based Model versus Freirean Critical Pedagogy

(see Figure 2 at the end)

We propose appropriating the concepts of project-based learning and research-based learning from competence-based methodologies, and redefining and addressing them through Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a spiral of research-action where all participants are involved in the diagnosis, practice and reflection-evaluation process which leads to a new diagnosis, practice, and so on. Epistemologically, PAR is related to an understanding that knowledge is culturally-situated, contextual, constructed through dialogue and subjected to internal and external power structures which condition the relationships between participants.

Ontologically, PAR assumes that everyone has legitimated knowledge, because everyone has an experience which can be put into words and shared to construct communal sense, which provides the context for the awareness necessary for the cycle of reflecting-doing-reflecting: the cycle of praxis. Hence, knowledge is dynamic and derived from praxis which is a result of individual and communal thoughts, feelings and actions. As such, the practical writing and reporting of PAR must be accompanied by a reflection on where the speaker situates him or herself in relation to such praxis. In this sense, PAR is never to be considered objective or neutral, but rather phenomenological.

Methodologically, PAR is open to all sorts of mixed participatory dynamics based on question-asking, which take into account its ontological and epistemological characteristics (assemblies, performative research, self-reflective research, etc.). When doing PAR, praxis is continuously articulated through questions (What? Why? Who? For what? For whom? Where? When? How? Etc.) Freirean critical pedagogy is based on the

art of questioning, since it is the ability to question, and not the ability to answer, that guides and consolidates the teaching-learning praxis. It is what Freire calls *problem-posing education*.

4. APPLYING FREIREAN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TO A COMPETENCE-BASED CURRICULUM

The following section focuses on a proposal that could be useful in redefining a competence-based curriculum within Higher Education Studies in Spain. This proposal is not meant to be either exhaustive or normative, but rather a contribution to the possibilities of Freirean critical pedagogy as a methodology to transform our teaching praxis at undergraduate level. Our proposal stems from our experience teaching within the field of Advertising and Public Relations, and how we used Participatory Action Research based on Freirean critical pedagogy to transform our teaching praxis within the curricular EHEA framework. There are, however, numerous articles which deal with the application of Freirean critical pedagogy to other disciplines; such as management education (Armitage, 2011; Dehler, 2009; Garcia, 2008), tourism education (Belhassen & Caton, 2011), industrial design education (Campbell & McDonagh, 2008), psychology (Jacobs & Murray, 2010) and mathematics (Lesser & Blake, 2006).

4.1. Prior Considerations

There are a set of transversal aspects to address in the curriculum which are crucial to its redefinition through Participatory Action Research. These matters should be thought about when making the curriculum, and should be talked about in class with the students through a question-oriented conversation.

- Awareness of power structures (What gives power? Who has the power? In what way is power used/abused? Etc.)

- Awareness of dialogic structures (How do we communicate with each other? How do we listen to each other? How is what we say legitimized? How do I normally participate? How does the space in which communication happens condition how we relate? Etc.)

- Awareness of cultural structures (What identifies me? What are my cultural filters? What are my prejudices towards diversity? What is my attitude towards diversity? How am I diverse? What are my stereotypes and how do I use them? What are my values? What is my idea of progress? What is my idea of property? What do I consider family? What is my idea of education? Etc.)

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Keeping power structures, dialogic structures and cultural structures in mind throughout the teaching-learning practice will contribute to the development of the critical being (Garcia, 2008). The critical being reflects upon the self, the reason and the world in his or her process of cognition, which must become a process of meta-cognition (What have I learned? How has this changed me? Why is this learning relevant to myself and to the community? How does this new learning change my levels of awareness? Etc.) These are questions necessary to passing from the competence-based model to the Freirean critical pedagogy model described in Figure 2.

4.2. The Structure of the Curriculum in Spanish Higher Education and its Redefinition

Before the beginning of the course, teachers are obliged to provide the students with a document which outlines the curriculum of the class. This document is called *Plan Docente de la Asignatura* (PDA) or Course Teaching Plan. Such a document is intended to serve as a guide for both the teacher and students throughout the course. The document contains the following sections:

- Presentation: Gives the student a summary of what the course is about and indicates the basic course information such as the language to be spoken in class and the hours of dedication.

- Competences: Outlines the general and specific competences which will be worked on throughout the course.

- Contents: Outlines the content (usually with a high level of detail) that will be addressed.

- Evaluations: Sets the frame for grading, including minimum attendance to access the possibility of evaluation, and the weight of assignments in the grade.

- Bibliography and other resources: Indicates mandatory and complementary sources which must be consulted by the students in order to follow the course.

- Methodology: Indicates how the teaching-learning process will take place (based on projects, based on research, based on self-study, based on peer learning, based on lectures, seminars, etc.)

- Schedule: Gives a detailed week by week calendar which indicates the course content that will be covered each week.

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The high level of detail which is contained in the document makes the in-class negotiation of course content, evaluation and tasks difficult. However, it can be reformulated through PAR - which requires a high level of dialogue-oriented methods, open-ended planning, and non-standardizing qualitative evaluation - and still be considered a research-based and project-based teaching methodology within the pre-established constructivist competence-based curriculum. In order for this to happen, we suggest below a few strategies that were useful to us in our teaching-learning experience[7]:

- Introductory classes. We found it necessary to use the first couple of weeks of the course to debate with the students about power structures, cultural structures, and dialogic structures and how awareness of them were important for the course. We also debated about Participatory Action Research and Freirean critical pedagogy, particularly about what faith, humility, love, trust, critical thinking, and hope meant to all of us and the implications of these values to the concepts of effort, competitiveness and excellence we were constantly exposed to and expected to follow. We addressed the meaning of authority in the classroom space and together thought of alternatives to "teacher-held authority". Some students felt highly motivated by the chance to discuss these matters, others were puzzled and others were conflicted. We explicitly addressed these feelings among those students that were willing to share them with the class, sometimes in small groups, and openly and positively accepted dissent among students who preferred more "traditional forms" of pedagogy. We made ourselves available to the students outside class time to further discuss these matters and how they felt more comfortable addressing them during the course.

- Competences. Usually competences are already predefined when a teacher plans out the course. This leaves very little breathing room, but including the few general and specific competences which explicitly relate to critical thinking and awareness of context is helpful in framing the rest of the curriculum. It was also useful for us to reflect upon what competences we wanted to develop for ourselves in relation to the competences which students were expected to acquire. We defined a set of competences we ourselves wanted to learn through

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[7] The course, titled *Strategies for Social Action* within the Advertising and Public Relations Degree is attended by 35 students during a three month term equivalent to 40 hours of in class work and 80 hours of out of class work. All basic teaching documents for the 2014-2015 Social Action Strategies course are available for public viewing, copying and sharing under Creative Commons in the following link: https://goo.gl/yfIKJN.

the course, and made them explicit with the students. This helped break the "teacher-teaches" and "student-learns" barrier, and created a climate of legitimizing the voice of the students as owners of knowledge.

- Bibliography. We suggested a set of sources in the curriculum, but students were free to use those or others they considered more suitable, according to their interests. We encouraged the students to consult diverse sources, both in authorship and in origin, and to critically address the literature (Are the sources diverse or are all authors white-western males? What sources are there from other geographical locations? Are they different? How?). Likewise, we explicitly encouraged diversity in the sources of examples used in class and within their projects.

- Methodology and content through PAR. To address the content, the curriculum indicated a set of topics that were predefined in relation to the specific course literature. This content was made responsive to student input through different methodological components:

  o Dialogic reading and debates: classes were structured around sharing readings and debates on topics and sources suggested by all participants around a given topic - usually predefined in the curriculum, but open to suggestions and changes desired by the students.

  o Collaborative class notes: students worked in groups throughout the course to develop joint class notes which could include content seen in class as well as content and sources from outside of class. These notes could be developed in any format they preferred and had to be accessible to all of the class participants. We revised the notes and shared them throughout the lessons, so as to include elements we found interesting to enrich class content.

  o Individual projects: each student was responsible for turning in, at the end of the course, an individual project that was open in content and format. The only stipulations given were that the piece had to reflect about 20 hours of work, and to somehow clearly state the importance of the topic and format chosen: both for the student and for the context in which it was created (if the piece was presented in a creative format this could be done in an annexed document). The projects were addressed by the students following a PAR methodology.

- ○ Group projects: students had to develop, in groups of four, the first stage of a PAR project; that is, the diagnosis and planning of the project. We did not undertake the complete PAR process due to course timing (in our case, only a trimester)[8]. Although students had to turn in only the initial research phase, to create their research and PAR plan they had to explore spaces within their community which were outside of their usual learning areas and challenged their comfort zones.

- • Evaluation through PAR. Evaluating and measuring is not the same. In our case, although evaluation was numerical, it included the students' self-evaluation and was agreed consensually through oral evaluation processes. Additionally, students were given the opportunity to propose tasks and assignments they would enjoy doing for extra-credit, so that if they were not very motivated by a particular assignment in class and felt like "slacking-off", they had alternative means of achieving their desired grades. However, this rarely happened, as students felt assignments were already open enough to include their interests during the course.

In general, all of the elements previously outlined allow a neoliberal competence-based curriculum as seen in Figure 2 to be redefined; becoming a PAR-based Freirean critical pedagogy. The response from most students in their class work, in their participation, and according to their teacher evaluations (both the one done in class at the end of term, and the "official" Department evaluation) was highly gratifying. We were pleasantly surprised that some of the students' remarks in the evaluations revealed that they considered the course the most difficult they had faced during their degree and yet they still graded the class highly. Through their individual and PAR projects, students engaged with their communities. Some of the students have continued with their projects after the end of the course. This has ranged from the creation of student associations within the university to direct involvement within community dynamics and organizations. Some students were introduced for the first time to a different way of doing, and became optimistic about how they could use their professional practice for the construction of another possible world. This makes us feel committed and certain that, at least for us, the teaching-learning practice is an instrument of emancipation and transformation. To the best of our abilities, with our students, and given the context, we

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[8] In the case of this specific course, students must plan a Participatory Communication Project, adapting the PAR development phases to the course context. In our case, we use literature for the specific use of PAR in communication, but there is extensive literature available for the application of PAR in many different fields.

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have struggled to "in communion liberate each other" (Freire, 1970: 133).

5. CONCLUSION

The neoliberal university is teaching all of us to look the other way. In a context in which funding is conditional on productivity under standardized conceptions of "excellence", there is no space or time to question the *status quo*. Complying with the competence-based curriculum as is imposed by the current EHEA policies amounts to telling us to teach our students to comply silently with power and violence – physical or symbolic – exercised by "others".
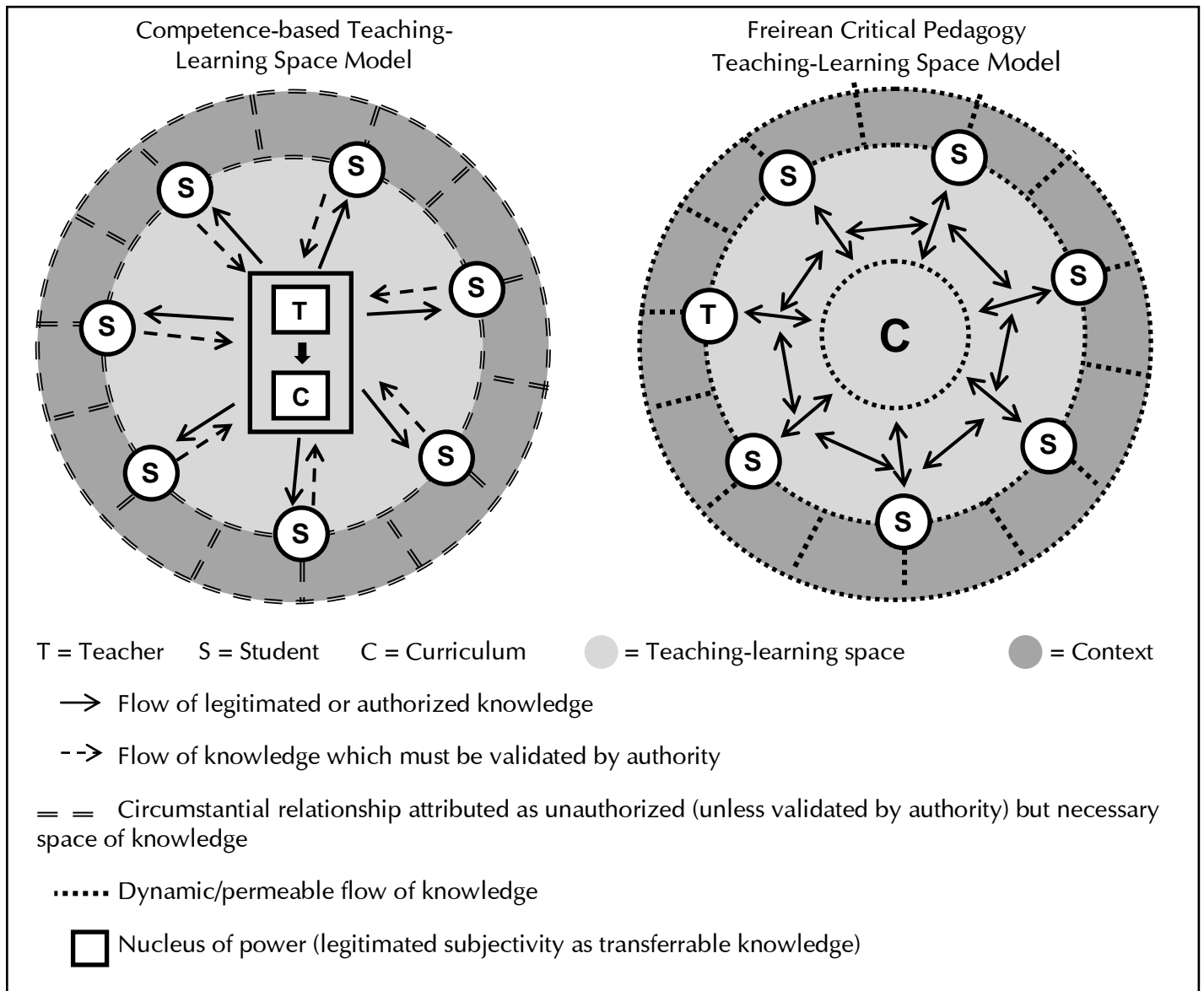
Love, hope, humility, trust, dialogue, and freedom as awareness, are falling prey to gain, competitive effort, self-betterment, instrumentalization, and freedom as consumer choice. Our students, as future professionals in the field of Advertising and Public Relations, will play a particularly important role in the maintenance – or dismantlement – of individualistic, consumerist subjectivities through their advertising and public relations campaigns. Advertising can also be solidary, trustworthy, hopeful and creative and can contribute to imaginaries of "another possible world". So can teaching. Freirean critical pedagogy provides the tools. Redefining the competence-based curriculum through Freirean critical pedagogy is possible, and it contributes to both our and to students' awareness of the self, of reason and of the world. This is important, because, as Theodore Adorno phrased it, "critical self-reflection offers the strongest barrier to the recurrence of Auschwitz" (Cho, 2009).

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Figure 1: Systemic Representation of Neoliberalism in Higher Education
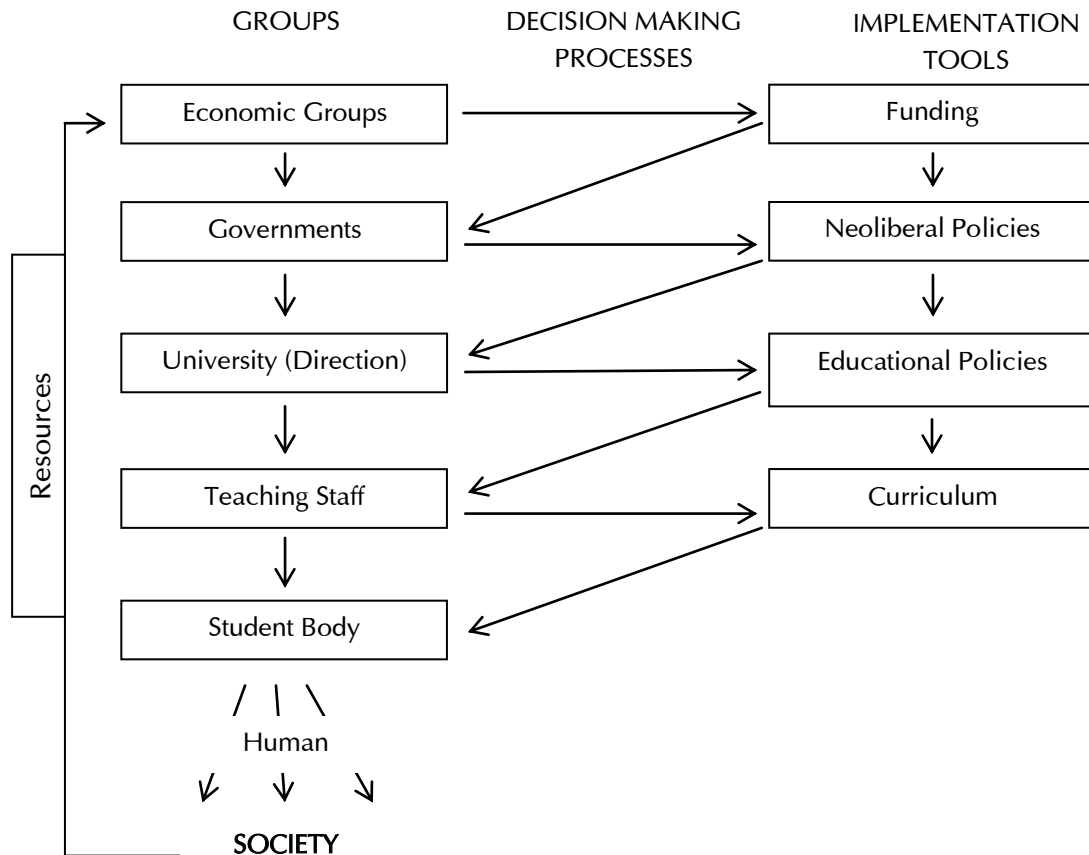
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Bolívar (2006), Cascante Fernández (2009, 2013), Chege (2009), Freire (2012) and Giroux (2010).

Figure 2. Competence-based Model versus Freirean Critical Pedagogy

T = Teacher   S = Student   C = Curriculum   ● = Teaching-learning space   ● = Context

→ Flow of legitimated or authorized knowledge

--→ Flow of knowledge which must be validated by authority

= = Circumstantial relationship attributed as unauthorized (unless validated by authority) but necessary space of knowledge

••••• Dynamic/permeable flow of knowledge

☐ Nucleus of power (legitimated subjectivity as transferrable knowledge)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

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