

Teaching through lives: biographical-narrative constructions thought as an active and meaningful methodology*

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Abstract

The present work intends to present as a perspective of the field of social sciences, the biographical-narrative approach of lives, has the founding potential – when applied in teaching – to activate and make meaningful (and significant) both learning and the lives of students and educators. Based on an interpretive and reflective reading, the methodology is based on a broad discussion about dealing with biographical narratives. Along with this, the relational possibilities that narrating and reconstructing trajectories reveal are pointed out, added to the understanding of how these are intercrossed in contexts and relationships at the micro and macro level, in the private and public spheres, encompassing traditional, popular and cultivated knowledge. This fact leads to the pedagogical latency of this methodological experience of teaching-learning-research. Therefore, it is intended to point to ways of operationalizing – disciplinary and also inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary – the processes and tools, as well as the gains in interests and contextualization of the contents proposed by the curricula and school calendars. These procedures have the relevant role of revealing the socio-historical present of the trajectories and of the agents that circulate educational life, but also of the families and, especially, of the students themselves, and place them as historical agents filled with subjectivities built in the daily interrelationships and intercoms. In this way, it is pointed out, finally, how the biographical-narrative approach has the potential to constitute itself as an active, interpretive and reflective methodology, without forgetting to be critical and to produce openings for the emancipation of the agents (educator and student).

Keywords

Narrative approach – Active methodologies – transdisciplinarity.

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Introduction

*And I learned that you always depend / On so many, many, different
people / Every person is always the marks / The daily lessons of so
many other people.*
Gonzaguinha (Paths of the heart).

When one thinks of teaching-learning methodologies characterized by allowing an active role for the student, therefore, one thinks of the image of these social agents as direct and effective agents of the and in the construction of their own knowledge. However, educators have – to apply such types of methodologies – the task of modeling their application, in view of the multiplicity of public proposed to them, seeking to insert students, in their socio-historical material conditions, as engaged collaborators.

The other part of this challenge is to make the process of learning by teaching not only active but also meaningful, in order to work with previous knowledge added to an interpretive, critical, reflective and autonomous or, more profoundly, emancipatory perspective. This is so that learners move from a position of passive object of the educational process to a place where they can be willing to deal with previous and new information, in order to expand, evaluate, update, reconfigure and continuously signify and re-signify the process. of teaching and learning in which they are inserted (FERNANDES, E., 2011).

Therefore, this work seeks to connect the two poles of this challenge – to make the classroom activity, school and educational active, in the objective sense, and meaningful, in the social and subjective sense – with just one answer. And this is materialized in the possibilities that the biographical-narrative approach of lives – a broad perspective of the field of social science research – contains. In other words, here we seek to show the founding potential that the application of this epistemological and methodological construct has to present to teaching and learning, when considering both the agent's personal history and its situation in the general scope of social reality and in the context of the disciplines.

The specificity of this approach applied to teaching lies in: (1) to make the activation of learning a practice inserted in the life of the students and those who surround their specific educational life, distancing themselves from the abstract construction that traditionally applies to the student; (2) to treat interpretively, reflectively and critically the senses and meanings presented by the narrative texts and also by the experiential contexts and lived by the characters addressed by these school narratives, whether students, educators, school servants, directors, family members, etc., in order to extract the mobilization significant and meaningful both learning and the lives of learners and educators; and (3) to accomplish the assimilation between the objective and material understanding of educational activities with the significant and cognitive subjectivity of the participants in the educational situation, constituting a relationship of strong interdependence between one and another challenge, between one and the other task and perspective. In this way, a scenario of partnership between teachers and students, between educational institutions

and learners, is constituted, which contradicts the passive teaching tradition, at the same time that it proposes to motivate continuous and multifaceted self-analysis processes.

Therefore, in this article, first, the foundations of what is meant by a biographical-narrative approach to lives are analyzed, and why this method is brought to the debate. Then, it reflects about the possibilities of performing the task and the challenge that this approach can offer, in addition to the entire methodological scope of its application. Subsequently, we intend to discuss the role that the operationalization of this methodological experience can fulfill. Finally, it is thought how the biographical-narrative approach, taken as an active and significant methodology, can constitute a critical ecology of knowledge that formulates emancipation (LECHNER, 2011).

The biographical-narrative approach

Understanding that the biographical-narrative approach is combined with a perspective that aims to build multidimensional accounts of social, collective and institutional life through the individual and singular dimension (DURHAM, 1986), I believe that the readings that are consonant with this are, on the one hand, the interpretive (GEERTZ, 1978; WEBER, 2003) and, on the other hand, the reflexive (ARCHER, 2011; BOURDIEU, 1989). Furthermore, it is worth analyzing, before starting the debate on the approach itself, the ideas of biography, individuality and experience.

In this way, biography, according to Burke (1997) and Miranda (2015), functions as a place of remembrance, education, contemplation and desire, but mainly opens up possibilities for a reflection that jointly promotes self-analysis. However, biography brings with it the ideas of individual, individualization and individualism, which, due to its agency, tends to shape narratives through the manipulation of identity (GOFFMAN, 1988), through the reflexive monitoring of the self (GIDDENS, 2002) or through the continuous act of creation of the self and the world of action (WAGNER, 2010). But both biography and individuality are produced through experiences, and these are elaborated both through culture (THOMPSON, 1991) and through the production of meanings (BONDÍA, 2002).

Thus, if for Wright Mills (1982) biography combines with the historical-political process of social structures, since it enables “to understand the broader historical scenario, in terms of its meaning for the intimate life and for the external career of numerous individuals” (MILLS, 1982, p. 11), for Baldus (1937), Florestan Fernandes (2007) and Darcy Ribeiro (1974) individual trajectories are linked to collective destinies. So that the expressions encompassed by the biographical-narrative approach are proposed to a microsociological or medium-range scope, while they are composed of a multiplicity of appropriations, which are dedicated to entering both the process of subjectivation of the structural rules and the double movement of objectifying subjectivity and subjectivizing objectivity. In this way, three of these appropriations are analyzed: life stories, formative (auto)biography and the notion of trajectory (DOSSE, 2009; BOURDIEU, 2011; GUSSI, 2004, 2008a, 2008b; MONTAGNER, 2007, 2009; KOFES, 2004; THÉ, 2017; THÉ; SANTOS, 2019).

Life history offers an almost experimental alternative to the social sciences, since it shares with the Other a selective process of the multiplicity of “lives” of a person in history,

capturing their interactions, processes, situations, events and actions, going beyond: the individual and singular character; the line between the individual and the socio-structural; and, the opposition between action and structure, in terms of intersubjective relations. By giving their own meanings to themselves and to their contexts, the narrators propose the formulation of understandings about “how we do” and “what we do here”, pointing to the possibility of the emancipatory construction of the report in the context of the intersubjective encounter, with the power to express a whole social and cultural grammar, mixed with the objectivity of the social issues that surround it. In this way, life history highlights the permanent dialectical process of the individual constituting and being constituted by society. Therefore, it carries both epistemological and political connotations, since the institutional context interacts with the subjective meanings of its processes, since, as Becker (1994, p. 109) understands, life history “more than any other another technique, except perhaps participant observation, can give meaning to the overexploited notion of process” (BERTAUX, 2005; BORN, 2001; DEBERT, 1986; GIBBS, 2009; GUSSI, 2004; GONÇALVES, 2008; MENDES, 2004; MARTINS, 1996, 2011; RIGOTTO, 1999; RIVAS FLORES, 2011; VELHO, 1989).

The formative (auto)biography, on the other hand, presents itself as an appropriation interested in understanding the process of personal construction and the appreciation of the told lived experience. In this way, it understands the narrators as “authors”, capable of thinking about the ascendancy of the contexts around them over their interiorities and consciously discerning the tenuous division between the past and the present. Therefore, it promotes not only the narrators’ words, but also their voices, denoting a process of symbolic circulation and connoting the stimulus to the sociopolitical dimension of this adaptation (BATISTA, 2010; GARNICA, 2010; LECHNER, 2010; ROSITO, 2010). The notion of trajectory can be synthesized through the ideas of inconstancy, fragmentation and sinuosity of the lives and contexts in which they are inserted. Thus, the notion expands its contours to each field and social area in which it is used, and to each formulation that has it as a discursive north. In this way, it is not intended to speak of the trajectory as a notion and as an idea, as something stopped, fixed or a stagnant fact in time, but from the perspective of how these narratives are frequently reconstructed and acquire new meanings (BORN, 2001; BOURDIEU, 1996; GUSSI; THÉ; PEREIRA, 2019; KOFES, 2001).

In general, the biographical-narrative approach privileges emic speeches and actions, opening up to alterities, possibilities and the recognition of contradictions, observing the configurations of intersubjective relationships being lived, or even, livable. In search to overcome the individual and singular character, it enters the oppositions and conflicts between the individual’s own needs and sociocultural conditions. It presents the movements of symbolic circulation and the sociopolitical proposition in the interest of unraveling of power asymmetries and the processes of social change. This approach is not only methodical or epistemic, but also emphasizes the cognitive dimension of agents and safeguards a relevant political dimension (DEL CONT, 2004; KOFES, 2004; VINCENT, 1987).

In a word, the reason for mobilizing this perspective of research methodology to constitute itself as a teaching-learning methodology lies in two aspects. The first is found in a gap observed in the very dynamics of teaching, the components of the intersubjective educational encounter, educators and students, reveal themselves superficially so that

engagement is relative and given to multifaceted deepening. The second aspect is found in the socio-pedagogical potential that the biographical-narrative approach contains when it is put into operation. These aspects will be, in some way, observed below.

Thinking it as an active and significant methodology

What always remains when approaching teaching-learning methodologies, even more so when they are active and significant, is the question of how. In other words, how to put into practice such a set of notions and how to transform them into operative ones. But not only that, there is an important element to be considered: for the methodology to be successful, it needs to point to a change concerning the atmosphere and the work process in the educational space.

In this way, in order to reach educationally multidimensional objectives – teaching-learning; criticality; reflexivity; autonomy; and emancipation, in the (micro)political dimension – proposed by the biographical-narrative approach in this scope, it is necessary to observe at least one of the four axes of its application that I indicate below. Before, I must emphasize that the appropriation, the mixture, the bricole, the interpretations and reinterpretations, and the conjugations between these axes are given and open to the applicator of the methodology; in other words, it is up to the teaching center and, in the first and last circumstances, to the professors to choose the best way to operate with this methodology in view of the reality in which the whole of the institution is included.

That said, the idea of narrative in the scope of education can be extracted in several ways, but, as I said earlier, four axes seem to me the most promising. These are: (1) the creation of diaries, whether with a narrative record of the activities carried out or of a personal nature; (2) the in-depth search for life stories, a character from the learning space is chosen and invited to tell about himself; (3) the exploration of formative (auto) biographies, the possibility of interaction and knowledge of the formative-educational paths (formal and informal) taken by the entire set of participants in educational life: teachers, students, coordination/director and civil servants in general, without forgetting the students' families; and (4) the construction of trajectories (in this axis, the narrative scope expands to think about the various ways of telling the intricacies of a life).

In order to explain each of the axes in detail, we begin with the diaries. The diary is a way of expressing oneself in the full depth of subjectivity, while paying attention to the typical patterns of everyday life, the circular paths during the day and its similarity to all others (FOUCAULT, 2004). In the diary, according to Lejeune (2008), the person who narrates uses it to preserve the memory, “survive”, to vent, to know oneself, to deliberate intimately, to resist, to think and simply to write. The person who writes and time, according to the same author, are the key points of this instrument, since, on the one hand, the “diary adventure is often experienced as a journey of exploration, even more than this knowledge of itself is not simple curiosity, but conditions the continuation of the journey” (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 263), on the other hand, the “diary will be both archive and action, ‘hard disk’ and living memory.” (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 262). Therefore, it is vestigial, even without being “memorial”, since it is a vestige that takes place in

[...] almost always a handwritten writing, by the person himself, with everything that the spelling has of individualizing. [...]. Sometimes, the written trace is accompanied by other traces, flowers, objects, various signs taken from everyday life and transformed into relics, or drawings and graphics. (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 262).

In order to use the diary methodologically, it must be understood that it presents itself both as a personal narrative with a guiding thread and, sometimes, a purpose and as an “endless” autobiography. Because it is open, it can always receive new entries, new writings and future reinterpretations. That is why it presents itself as a potent element of this methodology (LEJEUNE, 2008, p. 273).

Its power is given in its own operability. And this can be done by proposing that students write diaries that will be read only by themselves or, when they feel comfortable, by teachers. These diaries work with the purpose of helping students get to know each other and make themselves known and, through this knowledge and the traces presented, educators can pick up ideas that underlie the understandings and readings of the world of the group of learners. It is essential, in order to provide dynamics and reception, to allow students to verbalize narratives from their diaries in the classroom, with: loving (GORZ, 2008), confessional (FREYRE, 2010), everyday (BAUMAN, 2012) or mourning (BARTHES, 2011). The mediator of this methodological tool is responsible for operative patience and curative care, to take ownership of what is narrated, give rise to healthy debates with the collective and, in partnership with the students, extract points that can be located, located and contextualized for the deepening of their own questions of the curriculum. In these processes, students can make disciplinary knowledge personal, inserted in their lives and meanings from this experience of writing and narrating themselves, constituting a continuous activation in their own experiential scope.

If in the last section I theoretically presented the other axes, I commit here to explaining the ways in which they are used in the educational context. Therefore, the next axis indicated is life stories. This is a methodology that is characterized by the deepening of a specific life. In the field of education, it can be operated through the choice of one or a few people – paradigmatic for the educational center – invited to have their lives recorded in depth, so that their existence, their affections, their professional life, their likes and frustrations, etc., are all placed and exposed for understanding and contextualization. The way of doing it involves a set of recording modes to be made in this biographical-narrative approach, that is, being carried out in several sections, nudging between several or a single interlocutor, by various means (video, audio, photos and notes) and with different approaches, all striving for the construction of an experiential scenario of this character. To this end, professors and students in partnership must develop interview scripts that are open to improvisation, creating openings for the emergence of the idiosyncrasies of these people. This, in the end, reflects not only on the debate between narrating and living, but, above all, on the set of issues of: place and social stratification; historical processes; socio-spatial mobility; affectivities; register genres and languages; and the frames of options and choices available in this personal journey (BAUMAN, 2012).

Regarding the formative (auto)biography, it will agree with the previous axis in tool, in-depth interview with a pre-established script, while it will differ in the look. If in the history of life what is wanted is the in-depth experience of a paradigmatic life, here it is hoped to get a broad overview of the ways of forming and apprehending knowledge. Therefore, this axis is open to the reports of learners, presenting their educational experiences and the evocation of their masters in any context (family, sport, religion, politics, neighborhood and the educational context), but also to research by the body. student of the training paths of the other sectors that make up the educational center (coordination, civil servants in general and the teaching staff), without disregarding family participation. In these two paths, there is no hierarchy of knowledge or greater importance, if a certain training took place in formal or informal education. Therefore, there are the most recurrent paths of formation and, through a retrospective and perspective look, a set of choices and life possibilities is presented. In addition, this axis gives rise to meanings and resignifications to the act of learning and teaching, and gives students an active, engaged and critical perspective on their own learning journeys. Furthermore, it proposes material to think about the place given to education in the sociopolitical context and to extract objective, subjective and objective-subjective relationships with the programmatic contents of the curriculum.

Finally, the fourth axis, the construction of trajectories, is characterized by reconsidering the look at the biographical and understanding life as wandering, elaborating through ascents and descents, changes of route, marches and *démarches* and by *devir*, while discusses the linearity of narrating life. Therefore, despite also using the in-depth interview with a script, this opens both to the lived and to the liveable, and understands that factuality is as important as imagination. In its tooling is the construction of networks through the encounter of similar narratives and with proximities, and the possibility of interconnecting with aesthetics and imagery to compose the general picture of a trajectory. What forces us to remember that, by accepting the elusive narration, the trajectories must be constructed to allow the formulation of more direct understandings and interpretations, but not without the necessary depth, and allow the expression of the inconstancy that this axis wants to capture. In this way, this axis seeks to give the students involved in such activity the possibility to see in the microscopic processes of people's (or a person's) private life the macroscopic movements of economic, political and social life, how the processes of subjectivation of objectivity occur, objectification of subjectivity and the dialogue between individual and society. Thus, reconstituting the meaning and materiality of a set of contents that are presented to them in the teaching-learning process (BOURDIEU, 2011; ELIAS, 2001).

As seen, the great promise of this methodology is to give importance, voice and social place to all the agents that make up the teaching spaces, making students the protagonists of knowledge – from elaboration, choices and research to the processes of formulating interpretations, debates and uses – without leaving aside a whole set of possibilities for exposing the results of this implementation. And it is exactly here that the pedagogical latency of this methodological experience is found, in the sedimentary

interconnection between research, learning and teaching, forming a teaching-learning-research *continuum*.

However, it is not a methodology that has its best fruits due to the activism and “innovation” of a solitary teacher, even though it can present good results when applied in a single discipline. It should be considered, along with this, that it does not incorporate a short-term vision, but a longer implementation, requiring an involved and participative patience on the part of the partners of this enterprise – students and educators. Having made these considerations, it is evident that the operationalization of such a methodology requires broad participation of teaching-learning units that encourage dialogue, controversy and inter, multi and transdisciplinary debate, since biographical narratives transit through all fields of knowledge. and are presented in the most diverse languages (graphics, collage, drawing, numerical scales and also through the spoken and written word), in addition to revealing the masked and sublimated subjectivities and intimacies in the context of the teaching process, but which influence it in a central way.

Discussing the proposal: potential, performance and result

As presented, the biographical-narrative approach of the social sciences, in addition to the possibility of being taken as an active and significant methodology, embodies a *continuum* between the teaching-learning binomial and scientific research. And in this observation is its first potentiality, made practical at the moment of its operation, which is the approximation of the students, at any level of training, to the logics of scientificity. On the other hand, if we take the characterizations that Berbel (2011) makes of active and significant methodologies, in general and in particular, the approach most suited to the ideas of “learning by doing”, of building knowledge through experience, of giving rise to creative thinking and social and political learning, deepens them.

This is because it takes the practices of researching, learning and teaching to daily thinking, to lives, to reflection on training and trajectories, at the same time giving body and blood, name and life, to issues, be they curricular or existential. In another layer, the anima of educational institutions intends to change the environment and activate not only the student body, but also all knowledge and experiences that make the educational ecosystem work. Thus, it offers the possibility of a time and a voice to those who are neglected, as well as to the excluded, that is, to the learners, on the one hand, and to the servers seen as not having “useful” (academic) knowledge (cleaning, food and security, for example), on the other. In addition, the teaching staff can, in this way, reveal themselves more than through caricatured masks and offer themselves completely in the teaching-learning practice.

Another relevant point is that the biographical-narrative approach has the role of requalifying the idea of activating teaching-learning. This, first, by expanding the activated agents, as said before, and, later, by being a tacit criticism of constructs that are based on an abstract image of the student, and it does this by offering the applicator of the methodology an opening that seeks to insert all the whole of the educational community in the experience of narrating lives, experiences and journeys. Therefore, it is elaborated as a form of micropolitical experiment, as we will see below. On the other

hand, its pedagogical potential is not far behind, since the interest of students tends to expand and the contextualization processes make the contents proposed by the curricula and calendars more tangible and concrete, not to mention the complexity of learning, combining academic knowledge, traditional and popular (SÁ, 2009).

In the same way, it offers the opportunity to think and rethink the characterization of the meaning of the learning proposed by this type of methodology, since, if in some experiences the understanding of meaning is the arrival point, here it is the starting point. Through an interpretive look, the senses and meanings are sought and collated from three expressions: in the narratives themselves, in the indicated situational contexts and in the activated agents. É mediante essa comparação que os aprendentes e educadores (ambos pensados no sentido ampliado e reflexo) têm a experiência de, confrontando-se como outros olhares e trajetórias, significar e ressignificar o aprendizado e os conteúdos, as afetividades e os pontos de vista sobre a vida, de modo a ampliar, assim, os processos cognitivos significativos e significantes (BERBEL, 2011; FERNANDES, E., 2011).

The deepening embraced by the present proposal is also given by the reflective dimension, since students are led to think about their place in and of their agency on the world. Thus, if, on the one hand, there is a critique of capitalist and consumerist individualization through the encouragement of a reflective individuation, on the other hand, there is the insertion of people in a common and community context of debate and narrativity. In this process, it is possible to apprehend that the experiential problems are not unique and individualized, but recurrent and spread throughout the whole community, not to mention society. This congruence or continuity between individual and society generates a reflexive gain and contextual understanding that offer essential tools for the teaching-learning dynamics.

In the dimension of criticality, the approach proposes that students and educators not only be passive observers, but that they exercise a participatory observation and that, together with that, they are creators of reality. In other words, the biographical-narrative approach is closely related to what Berbel (2011, p. 29) points out about the problematization processes, since it also “offers the means to develop the ability to analyze situations with an emphasis on the conditions” and can present answers fundamentally linked to the social, political and economic profile of the community as a whole. But it goes further, as it does not petrify the agents covered by the narrative scope, understanding them as a historical category and that, therefore, is constantly changing in the multifaceted context of society’s lines of force. Therefore, it has the ability to help in the construction of complex scenarios of social interaction of the narrators, taking into account the other individuals, the conditionalities and the domains of power (GUSSI, 2008b).

Another aspect deepened by the biographical-narrative approach is the dimension of promoting autonomy. This is because active methodologies indicate that the observation of certain precepts – such as nurturing the learner’s personal interests, being patient and rationalizing the explanation of certain contents – would encourage the learner’s autonomy. In this way, the approach, rather than proposing to observe these precepts, constitutes them as autonomous through a language that includes multiplicity and otherness. In a word, more than autonomy, what the present proposal connotes is an opening for an emancipatory education, since it contains the Freirean ideas that “no

one is freed alone” and that “men educate themselves among themselves”, conveying in this tune the liberating and awareness-raising dialogicity. This makes the biographical-narrative approach agree with the Freirean perspective when Freire (2018, p. 120) says that it is necessary to carry out a dialogue between worldviews and understand the situations of the participants of this dialogue, emphasizing that “what is intended to be really investigate, it is not men, [...] but their thought-language related to reality, the levels of their perception of this reality, their vision of the world” (2018, p. 121-122). In the same way, the approach carries with it the possibilities and potentiality of producing an ecology of knowledge, since it opens to alterity and listening to the most diverse knowledge in search of, through the apprehension of these, a new and emancipated knowledge is formulated. (BERBEL, 2011; LECHNER, 2011; SANTOS, 2009).

In short, the biographical-narrative approach as an active and significant methodology has in the partnership between educators and students and between narrators its most evident characteristic, leaving in its second layer its role of revealing the socio-historical present, with its contradictions, reformulations and contextual conditionalities, while motivating processes of both self-analysis and awareness. In this way, the sedimentary link between the challenge of educational practice and that of meaningful practice is effective, pointing to five deepenings that assure it, in my view, the status of an active and significant teaching-learning methodology, namely: openness to multiples knowledge; composition of meaningful and significant cognitive resources; parallelization between reflexivity and contextualization; possibilities of discussion about oppressions, dominations and expressions of power; and, also, an emancipatory opening discourse that relates dialogicity and ecology of knowledge.

Final considerations

As discussed in the previous section, the biographical-narrative approach has all the potential to be operationalized as an active and meaningful methodology because, in addition to being active, it brings together interpretative, reflective, critical and emancipatory interfaces. So that it can come to help in a multifaceted way the teaching-learning relationship between educators and students, placing both as agents and formulators of their own knowledge, without forgetting to, in this intercourse, expand the agencies of the entire educational community.

Thus, it is necessary to remember that, although promising, its full use requires awareness of the entire educational community that seeks to carry it out. However, even if punctual, it can generate good results in the sense that, reflexively, educators and students will present themselves more disarmed and more open to the pre-existing knowledge that one and the other carry. It somehow helps, on the one hand, the formulation of a more cohesive and integrated partnership and, on the other hand, a composition of knowledge and learning validated by the intersubjective encounter in a way that composes, even if in the microcosm, the referential of an ecology of knowledges.

Therefore, if living and narrating life do not differ as much as one thinks, bringing the concept of narrativity of lives to educational processes, on the other hand, can

multiformly reform the instances of teaching and learning, even more profoundly because it expands the spaces of teaching-learning on the opposite path to lives, since consciously and unconsciously these openings to narrate and dialogue about lives allow others to do the same, enhancing the results for an emancipatory education.

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