The university teacher and appropriated evaluation practices in higher education: a student's perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article is the result of an investigation done in the preservice teaching education courses at Londrina State University (UEL), which tried to understand evaluation practices of university teachers working in those courses nominated by students as good evaluators. The study included semi-structured interviews with 48 teachers, recorded and transcripted for treatment and qualitative analysis. One of the main aspects was to observe personal aspects which stimulate the evaluation practice in higher education, focusing on the teachers personal experiences, self-evaluation, and the reflective process on their teaching practice. The values and conceptions which embody the evaluation practice were also investigated. The main objective of the research was to extract lessons from the positive practice of the evaluation for university teachers in general. Some of the noteworthy lessons included: the assumption of a comprehensive conception on teaching which surpasses the limits of the classroom itself, the self-evaluation as a continuous process of the evaluators practice, and the predominance of the objectives over the procedures in the evaluation process.

Key words: higher education. university teacher. teaching. evaluation.

Introducing

The investigation reported in this article started with the Integrated Research Project entitled *Evaluation in Higher Education: meanings and consequences,* more specifically, with the sub-project *Learning Evaluation at the Londrina State University (UEL) Undergraduate Courses*, whose objective was to find out from higher education students which evaluation practices they considered positive and negative. The content of the responses was analyzed, and different meanings were extracted from their answers, including the possible consequences for their

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future lives. Results were significant and thought-provoking; however, at that moment, only the students were heard. The results of this investigation can be found in Berbel *et al.* (2001).

A total of 428 questionnaires were answered by 738 junior (3rd. year) and senior (4th. year) students from 14 Teacher Education Courses. The instrument included 2 open questions on their positive and negative evaluation experiences. Later in this work we discuss the positive experiences mentioned by these students. Several practices were seen as appropriate, positive and motivating for their learning and development process. In some cases, the students appointed the teachers who were responsible for the positive practices. A total of 48 teachers were mentioned by the students as providers of positive evaluations. This result was used as the starting point for this investigation.

This work adopted the stages suggested by the Problematization Methodology (Berbel, 1995,1996) , based on Maguerez's Arch (*apud* Diaz Bordenave & Pereira ,1982).

Our objective was to have a deeper knowledge of the evaluation practices that could probably be breaking traditional standards of teacher's performance, and therefore, promoting better learning and knowledge elaboration for the students, and, consequently, greater development.

We contacted the 48 teachers appointed by the students which were willing to cooperate with this investigation. Using a predominantly qualitative approach, teachers (41 teacher educators and 7 with Bachelor Degrees) were interviewed, using taped, semi- structured interviews, which were then transcribed for further data treatment and analysis, based on Minayo (1994).

Among other questions which helped draw the profile of the interviewees, these were considered fundamental for this investigation:

- Your students considered your evaluation practices positive (each teacher was informed on the student's comments). Could you describe in detail your evaluation practices? What do you do exactly? Why do you do it this way?
- How do you evaluate your own evaluation practices? What are the results?
- Do you think the evaluation experiences you had as a student have influenced your evaluation practices as a teacher?

We chose to describe, analyze and learn from these teachers' positive experiences. Data analysis followed approximate guidelines to those recommended for content analysis (Minayo, 1994), and extracted from the answers elements that converged to some reflection points.

In the specific aspects highlighted by this work, our theoretical background, based on dialectics, is supported by the Gimeno Sacristán's (1999) concept of education.

Although our intention was not to have all the answers to our questions, as Didactics teachers, we had some specific concerns which led us to the development of this study. Among our main concerns was the fact that many teacher educators, in general, were graduates from teaching education courses, thus they were prepared to both act as teachers and teach other teachers. Even so, how to explain the differences in these teachers' approach to evaluation? According to the students' answers in a previous research, some of these college teachers' evaluation practices were considered positive and some negative. If some teachers have a more positive approach to evaluation, what would it take for all teachers to have the same approach? Is it a question of knowledge? Beliefs? Experiences they had during their school years? A consequence of their disposition towards innovation?

For some time literature on evaluation has introduced some changes in the evaluation practices, moving from less traditional paradigms, to a paradigm that emphasizes the diagnostic and formative aspects of the evaluation process.

However, it is important to remember that the problems related to educational evaluation in our country are rooted in its own education history. Evaluation issues

have always been a teaching problem and are part of a traditional system which is in a crisis and being constantly questioned. In this context, to discover, explore, and learn from positive evaluation practices mean trying to overcome difficult educational situations related to teaching in general, and moving towards more innovative teaching and evaluation concepts which value the students' education, growth and development.

Teaching in most institutions, including ours, is characterized by a practice limited to the classroom time and space. Normally, the institution sets down in its academic regulations an evaluation system based on grades and procedures which are related to a pass or fail process. This concept of learning and evaluating maintains a *status quo* which supports a system that emphasizes exact evaluations and overestimates grades. Thus, it becomes relevant to learn how the teachers, whose evaluations were considered positive by the students, fit in this context, taking advantage of their pedagogical freedom to act differently from the old established models.

In this search for more information on these teachers' practices, it was essential, firstly, to consider the personal aspects involved, since education has a lot to do with people's concrete actions ("*only individuals act, not the social institutions and other similar collective structures*"- Giner apud Gimeno Sacristán, 1999, p.30).

In education, we cannot simply analyze actions apart from the actors who perform them, since all educational acts are carried out by a subject, a person, with a biography and a personal and collective history (Gimeno Sacristán, 1999). Therefore, to know the personal characteristics of the interviewed teachers was indispensable. To find out about the values that give support to their options and choices can help us understand the reasons behind their educational actions. What do they value? What are their concepts? What are their principles? What do their actions reveal? What are their worries regarding their students' education?

Whenever we reflect on the reasons why a certain evaluation practice is established rather than another, we have to consider the many factors that interfere in the decisions made by teachers regarding their performance. Among these factors are the educational policies that interfere in the institutions' organization, and in the concepts, conduct and practices of their teachers.

The socioeconomic changes that have been occurring in the world since the last century, especially the phenomenon of economic globalization, brought to the world of education the taylorist work model. The idea that the school must serve the community like a company has become very popular, especially in Latin America, due to neoliberal policies.

The educational system goes through an intense policies restructuring process, and the consequences have a strong impact on the university and, consequently, on the institutions' operations and personnel. Two of the most perverse effects of this dynamics are massification and privatization. In this universe, teaching also is affected by the changes which help establish and intensify a crisis of uncertainty over the goals, values and the role of education (Trindade, 2001).

The institutional evaluation system itself, whenever it emphasizes aspects related to research and publication, influences those teachers who do not value their teaching practices and other pedagogical issues.

To understand what takes place in the education world one must comprehend the relationships between the individual and the social or institutional, since education is the act of people, among people and on people. Although we recognize the power of structures, we must also recognize the value of people's actions and their role in transforming education (Gimeno Sacristán, 1999).

In an attempt to look for the elements that support the evaluation decisions and practices in Higher Education, we chose to take into consideration the aspects that involve the teacher as a pedagogical agent. In this text, we highlight the aspects mentioned by the teachers in their interviews, which represent topics for reflection on evaluation practices: personal questions, intentions, and values and beliefs. Our data show that the actions and decisions are based on three aspects, among others: personal experiences, reflections motivated by the self-evaluation and value evaluation process, and their beliefs.

Personal experiences

Everything a person does is, undoubtedly, an expression of who she/he is. Whenever a teacher is in action, he/she exposes his human condition, even though some people may see his/her work as predominantly technical. The teaching action, however, involves an interaction among other human beings that are influenced by each other, turning the action into an expression of a subject endowed with a subjective culture. Thus, the social does not cancel out the individual particularities, and it is impossible to consider an education action among people without contemplating the subjects individually. We must, therefore, take into consideration the teacher as a person and pedagogical agent. Each teacher acts according to his/her own motivations, life history, experiences and influences (Gimeno Sacristán, 1999).

We noticed that the repetition of models is a common practice. Positive experiences are used as models for action and inspiration. In this aspect, we found out that the teaching of evaluation by the teachers from the Pedagogy Area helps to change the future teacher's attitude towards the evaluation process, as demonstrated by the a student's statement below:

A teacher from the Pedagogy Department (I don't remember the name of the discipline she taught), was very competent, very much so, and she taught me a lot about how to evaluate students... (L2).

Other statements reveal the possibility of change in relation to how teachers see evaluation based on their different forms.

She was a positive model to me..., at least different. She made me have a different idea of how it is to finish the school year and get something out of that grade, of that number (E1).

I had teachers that talked a lot, and were slow with the content of the course, they sat down, and really spent time on the object under analysis, and they understood that it had to be slow. I think this is the element that I brought with me. The possibility of having a discussion, a reflection, of reading one page today, two tomorrow, always challenging the students (F1).

The statement below, however, emphasizes the indissolubility of evaluation and teaching forms:

I had a Botanic teacher in high school that really made a difference in my life ...maybe it was his attitude towards discipline..... But I also had good teachers when I was in college ...during the methodology and teaching practicum phases. Perhaps this experience rose my interest in not only evaluation but also in the way I deal with discipline as a whole which always culminates with the evaluation, because,... you know... you must tie everything up (M1).

Among the educators who had a lot of influence on the students were those who were strict but at the same time excellent teachers:

Some of the teachers were so inaccessible that it was impossible to learn anything from them. However, I had some competent and strict teachers that corrected me, evaluated me, made me rewrite my papers... they were not many, but the few I had taught me a lot and I try to pass this experience on to my students. Not to mention the authors that I read on evaluation (L3).

On the other hand, the negative experiences also served as an inspiration for good practice. Today, even those experiences that were negatives at one time are examples of what future teachers should not do with their students, and therefore transform the teacher's action into positive evaluation practices.

Among the negative experiences that influenced the way they saw evaluation is their aversion for evaluations that are used as punishment and the incoherence between course and evaluation levels. The subjectivity issue in evaluation has already been mentioned in this study. Another issue raised is related to grading. What does it mean?

The teaching experience acquired through time has a significant role in the development of teaching attitudes. The learning generated by this experience is mentioned by teachers as extremely important for their work.

A fundamental thing for my development was my teaching experience... the experience itself is a formation (G2).

It's a combination of things... You grow as a student... as a teacher, and your practice is changed (F5).

I think that when you start your practice , you adapt yourself to the contingencies you are exposed to, then you get the students' feedback, that they have difficulties, that they do not see any relationship between what he is doing and that what he sees ahead of him, then you start maturing as a teacher (B1).

We have also to consider that every action presupposes an intention that plays a decisive role on the action itself. Although it does not explain the action by itself, intention is what gives the action meaning, significance, value. According to Gimeno Sacristán (1999, p.3):

To explain human action and the educative action in particular, is a complex task. In trying to discover what make us move , we find some connected concepts of difficult delimitation that penetrates a little systemized world, and that are used , distinctively, in different disciplines: goals, intentions, interests , motives, objectives, needs, passions which gravitate on the agent or subject that carries out the actions.

In the next statements, these aspects occur, especially when one likes what he/she is doing.

But I like what I do. I like to prepare evaluations. Is it tiring to correct a written test? Sure! I won't pay lip service to the status quo. However, I like to spot problems with precision, and obviously I want to see when a student reaches his/her objectives fully (F2).

A student once told me that I teach with my eyes. I replied that I also needed his eyes, his wide open, shining eyes as references. When there is no shine in our eyes, there is no motivation, and I, of course, I want to give a lesson that shines! (N2).

Gimeno Sacristán (1999) says that the teaching action's intentionality, objectives, and meanings project a dimension on the teacher's professionalism never dealt with before by researchers, and little considered by teacher development programs.

The world in crisis is demanding that we resume discussions on educational philosophies to explain the personal, social and cultural development guidelines proposed, and to talk about teaching responsibilities, cognitive professionalism, and external stimuli (Gimeno Sacristán, 1999, p.41-2).

For this author (1999, p.32), "quality *of education is indissoluble from the teachers' human quality".* Both will and intention alone can project the future, the possible, to some place beyond the reality we live in. This, in our opinion, implies the assumption of an educational project that does not exempt us from our responsibility towards teaching development issues.

Self- evaluation and the process of reflecting on the teaching practice

In the academic context, teacher development issues become relevant whenever teachers are evaluated either by the institution, students, or graduate studies support bodies.

According to Lipman (1995) , in general, academic professionals are motivated to think critically in some occasions. Some of these occasions involve situations in which they have to evaluate our performance or that of our colleagues. For instance:

- Whenever the work of a colleague is read and revised;
- Whenever they are part of a committee that will evaluate the proposal of a colleague;
- Whenever they file a complaint and some actions are demanded;
- Whenever students question the criteria adopted to evaluate courses, disciplines and the methodology used.
- Whenever they compare they compare their current professional conduct with what they think it is the ideal conduct;
- Whenever they detect tendencies or prejudices in themselves or others;
- Whenever they search for alternatives for the established, but unsatisfactory, practices.

In the last years, the parameters and concepts about Higher Education teacher development have changed due to the country's new educational reality. More than never before, society has demanded that this professional becomes a competent individual, active in the society and in the job market, with greater level of education, capable of using information technology in his/her teaching as well as national and international academic networks; someone who has contemporary knowledge and uses it to solve problems; capable of integrating his/her discipline with the curricular and historical and social context , and is able to adopt different teaching approaches.

Teachers hardly ever have these competencies in mind; however, in general, we notice that self-evaluation may trigger a process of reflection that, without a doubt, will motivate, change and improve practices. Some statements reveal the importance of this reflection:

This year I am happier than I was in past years, but I am not fully satisfied yet. I think I still have to look for a more interactive type of evaluation (F3).

I tried to see myself in those moments. Everything helped me grow in my profession (M3).

Sometimes the frustrations with their own performances and the preoccupation with the quality of their work can initiate the necessary reflection:

This year I'm not enjoying most of my lessons; they are very repetitive because I became the head of the department, and problems are many and varied. On top of that, I have to study and elaborate my plan of work. I don't have time to dedicate to my teaching. After this term as department head I plan to stay away from bureaucratic positions (L1).

I made many mistakes, I was a bore, as a professional,.... I've always been a dedicated teacher, and I like what I do, I mean, this exchange of experiences (L3).

Self-evaluation, many times initiated by the evaluation students make of the discipline or teacher, is essential to trigger changes and improvements in teaching practice. This can be confirmed by the following statements:

Look, honestly, I'm always changing since evaluation helps you evaluate your performance as well, right? Not only the students' evaluations but also our performance as teachers. So I'm always changing, like this year, for instance...(G1).

The self-evaluation process also helps the reflections teachers might develop in relation to their concept of teaching, learning, their commitment to education and their educator role, as the statements below illustrate:

My practice is based on my conception of teaching, development, learning, and then I try to be coherent with these conceptions and the theoretical foundation that supports these concepts and the evaluation I adopt. This reflexive practice, the feedback question, is two learning moments in which I need to invest (C1).

Therefore, my intention is to generate motivation. I create a highly relaxed atmosphere... I tell them if they do not want to stay, they can leave... and that they should not worry about the number of absences. My concern is to create a more united work group to participate in extension projects that will transform this individualistic and competitive society. I'm not a teacher. I'm an educator! (B3).

Results from this work show that self-evaluation is an exercise that helps the teacher reflects on his practice, revealing motivation and intentions. It can also be considered a great resource for developing awareness on the importance of evaluation and other higher education pedagogical questions.

Values and conceptions behind evaluation practices

The task of evaluating, which involves a value judgement, has both objective and subjective aspects. The teacher , as part of his/her function, must make decisions and carry out actions that include not only technical competence but also values and life options that will affect people (Vasconcellos, 2002).

The history of education, the current educational reality, and the organization and structure of institutions have had an influence on the minds and conceptions of many subjects involved in the educational process: teachers and students.

Often these conceptions are connected to the traditional teacher development model, in which teachers merely transmit information and students receive it passively. This explains the great value given to the accumulation of specific knowledge in one area and to the transmission of great quantities of content during the teaching process. However, this is not the idea, exactly.

What we intend is to introduce innovations, and the concept of innovation is related to the use of new technologies, and the idea of a competent teacher can be related to a better performance in dealing with these technologies. Training in these new technologies is then highly recommended (Vasconcellos, 2005).

However, teaching is not a mechanical act. It is guided by motives which are not indifferent to values, since each action involves making choices among many alternatives and is developed through the relationship among people, driving their lives and establishing positions of power, since many decisions are based on equality relationships. The curriculum is a valued cultural selection and its content is selected from a series of possibilities.

To conceive the practice or teaching acts as a moral subject involves not only the objectives of the curriculum and personal motives but also the activities, the "how to do it", the interactions between teachers and students, evaluation methods, since each action has a meaning and is a calculated possibility among others. In summary, it is an epistemological characterization of education as something open in its conception, with many different meanings and different developments, that is constantly posing the noble question of how acceptable is each teaching action (involving a student, the choice of a method, an evaluation practice, an educational policy, or a professional claims of teachers), before analyzing its effectiveness (Gimeno Sacristán, 1999, p.45).

Among the conceptions and values found in this investigation is the recognition of the importance of developing a human relationship with students and how this relationship is established, as confirmed by the statements below:

Students like attention; they do not like grouchy, bad - tempered teachers. Who likes them? Students don't like teachers who are rude; they don't like teachers who answer only yes or no; they like teachers who communicate and look into their eyes. I have a very particular practice.... In 20 minutes I'm going to teach a group of students, 40 students, and, in the 2 hours we will be together I'll look into their eyes at least twice (E2).

I read a lot about teacher's corporeity in the classroom. Teachers cannot sit down, stand still, motionless, uninterested, and I knew all this since I was 16 and 17 years old. Kids like you on their side, holding hands; teenagers love to meet you in the cafeteria during recess and hug you, shake hands, give you a kiss (E2).

We understand that the body expression of a teacher towards the students is not an isolate act of paternalism or of seduction for his/her class. We see it as an example of what Gimeno Sacristán (1999) calls the moral of thinking education in its acts whose meanings have possibilities that must be calculated. Thus, the body approximation demonstrated by the teacher reflects the importance given to the development of interactions with the students, and, consequently, of a good didactic relationship.

Other elements demonstrate the search for meanings in relation to knowledge (Gimeno Sacristán, 1999):

The value of a humble and less presumptuous posture towards knowledge:

One thing is interesting, an a littlet Socratic,... that the more you study the more you find out how ignorant you are. Therefore, we become aware of the fact that our level of ignorance is greater than we imagined (G2).

The value of developing a critical attitude in the students:

I am much more concerned with the student's critical mind than whether he/she is going to learn what a problem-based methodology is, the rules of positivism, dialectics, that is, if he/she knows these presuppositions. I am interested in knowing if the student is capable of feeling if he/she is a teacher with great social and political responsibilities (A1).

The importance of quality and not quantity in content teaching:

This is what makes sense… the way I think a school, especially higher education. The students cannot only be depositaries of information, without putting into practice what they think, the exercise of thinking, having ideas, opinions, being critical. Otherwise we haven't made any advancement (F4).

The attitude of respect for the student and the preoccupation with the development of his/her citizenship:

They are free to speak. I try not to interrupt them during seminars, and, normally, I wait until they finish talking about the text, topic, to make some comments. I avoid corrections; however, eventually I correct some wrong information when necessary (F2).

Therefore my evaluation is a complete evaluation. I evaluate them from the time they enter the classroom, their lives, problems and the reason why they are not following the activities. My evaluation is in the man, and my preoccupation is in developing this man, not only professionally but, most importantly, his/her citizenship (J2).

The reflection on how acceptable each teaching act is, as mentioned by Gimeno Sacristán (1999), is revealed in the awareness of the authoritarianism implicit in many evaluation practices, and in the reflection on the inadequate behavior of teachers and students:

In my opinion, evaluation is an instrument of negative or positive power. Teacher have to work well with this question, otherwise, they will have to "abort" the student's career (L5).

For example, that teacher who gives tests to students in the classroom, a relatively objective test, not with multiple choice or fill-in the blanks questions, but an information test, and that teacher who leaves the classroom and takes a 20 minute walk while the group is discussing: where is this on the text? Show me so that I can copy. I cannot consider this a positive practice, no way! (F2).

Statements that revealed positive ways of understanding evaluation were relevant for our study. Evaluation is seen, in these cases, as a situation that facilitates students' growth, contributes to the learning process and allows for a dialogue and personal interaction between teachers and students.

An essay test with consultation, for instance, promotes reflection. It does not matter if they, as one teacher mentioned, "*memorized the definitions, but rather, whether they made use of the theoretical background to read the reality*" (C1).

The statements presented reveal that, besides all external influences from the educational policies that guide the educational system as a whole, and, consequently, have power over teaching institutions, other factors, more closely related to the agents of the actions, affect the evaluation practice motivation.

The teacher, as a person and pedagogic agent, acts based on individual motives and according to his/her previous experiences. His/her student history, post-graduate education, and everyday classroom experiences are strong components in developing the foundation for his actions in relation to teaching and evaluating. His/her actions, words, attitudes and postures reveal

conceptions and values that reflect in the intentionality, options and decisions that will guide his/her higher education teaching practices.

Concluding

At this point we would like to return to the initial objective of this investigation: to extract lessons from the evaluation practices considered positive by the teachers appointed by the students. In this text, we highlight the lessons which are related directly to the object of this analysis: personal questions, intentions, values and conceptions of the higher education evaluating teachers. The following considerations can be seen as lessons on how to permanently search for a positive way of act in the complex task of higher education evaluating.

The assumption of a broader teaching conception which goes beyond the limits of a classroom and **the class itself**. The commitment teachers have with students go beyond the limits of the institutional red tape and makes clear the bond created by the teacher and students, which, in turn, extrapolates their traditionally established "obligations" (teach at a certain pre-established time, grade papers, etc…).

It is evident to us that the assumption of a broader teaching conception, as that described above, depends on the factors emphasized here: personal and professional experience, opportunities to reflect on these questions, and values and conceptions. This question is within the scope of our concerns with the theme of higher education teaching development which needs urgently to recover some of the dimensions that go beyond scientific, technical and political knowledge, and enters the field of ethics (Vasconcellos, 2005).

Self-evaluation as permanent practice. Self-evaluation is an important reflection resource to help raise awareness on the meanings of higher education evaluation practices and pedagogical questions. It helps the reflections teachers might develop in relation to teaching, learning, and their behavior as educators, promoting new motives, changes and improvement in their practices.

The prevalence of ends over means. Evaluation forms can be many and varied in their combinations, but what counts in the intention with which they are realized, and how effective they are in teaching students during their formative years.

We would like to stress that the lessons extracted from this research - based on the aspects highlighted in this text – *personal experiences, reflections generated by the self-evaluation process, and values and conceptions that teachers have-* form a group of reflections on important elements to be considered and experienced during the education of a teacher. Thus they should be included in course pedagogical projects to be intentionally covered.

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