

## THE TEACHING IDENTITY OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS: ITS IMPORTANCE IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

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### Abstract

The importance of studying the identity of university teachers lies in their role as mediators of learning and as key players in the professional training of new generations. In this sense, we report the advances of a research whose purpose is to investigate how the teaching identity of university professors is constructed and the way they perceive and mean their pedagogical practice. In the investigation of the construction of the identity of university professors, their school and professional trajectories, as well as their teaching experiences and practices, become important. On this occasion, only the findings related to the teaching trajectory and pedagogical practice of the professors are reported. The qualitative biographical-narrative approach was used to obtain six life stories of teachers from different disciplines working in public and private universities. The narratives on the adequacy of the curriculum and the pedagogical practices of the teachers, as axes of the teaching trajectory, made it possible to investigate how the teachers perceive and mean their pedagogical practice, and an approach to the understanding of the current teaching practice and their identity formation. Among the most important results in these areas are planning and academic freedom in the curriculum; implicit theories of teaching and learning; transmission of values; and the challenges of teaching: the transformation of practices and the relationship with students.

**Keywords:** *Teaching identity, curriculum, pedagogical practice, university professors, life stories.*

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### 1. Introduction

The identity of teachers has been transformed by the structural, political and social changes that have had an impact on education, and as a result of these changes, teachers have lost autonomy in practice. Our attention will be focused on university teaching identity, since the university is a unique space for the construction of knowledge, it presents singular characteristics that allow a particular identity configuration of university teachers (Contreras, 1997).

Currently, university professors are exposed to an apparent lack of professionalization in their work, partly due to the neoliberal and managerialist dynamics in which higher education finds itself. Public and private universities have gone from being spaces for the training of professionals, cultural promotion and the generation of knowledge and arts; to being organizations whose main objectives will be competition at national and international level, obtaining more and better funding and the exposure of the university to the global market (Jiménez, 2015; Valle, 2015).

The current condition of university teaching exalts the professor as the executor of the neoliberal and modernizing proposal. The teacher must make use of the new educational technology, teach, learn and train continuously, participate in the respective training and evaluation programs generated from outside by policies and organizational systems often alien to the teaching life, which positions him/her as an executor instrument of policies and strategies designed from outside (Aguirre, 1989).

In view of this scenario, the identity of university teachers requires new research that will allow them to continue developing and strengthening their skills as teachers and professionals in their particular area of knowledge. In addition, teaching identity requires a specific field of research that differentiates it from the work on professional identity, since we consider that teaching has its own characteristics that should be recognized as distinctive of teachers and their identity.

These characteristics of the teacher and his or her identity become relevant not only because they have to do with his or her role as a mediator of learning, his or her responsibility in the curriculum and as a key actor in the educational process, but also because of the role played by his or her emotions in his or her daily work. Therefore, the personal, work, cultural and institutional conditions immersed in the continuous development of the teacher not only have a direct impact on the construction of his or her

identity as a teacher, but are also reflected in his or her educational action, therefore, the particularities of this construction go beyond the professional identity alone.

From various theoretical perspectives we retake the concept of identity as a subjective and self-reflective process by which subjects define their differences with respect to others, in this process the individual recognizes and reaffirms himself through others (Mead, 2009; Berger and Luckmann; 1968; Giménez, 2005; Goffman, 1997), in addition, we prioritize the conception of reality proposed by socioconstructivism, as the understanding of reality as a social construction (Ibáñez, 1979).

We consider that identity is a complex construct, which with difficulty we can disarticulate in everyday reflection, since the social actor brings together the various levels of identity in such a way as to produce a subjectively unified image of himself (Dubet, 1989:536), but for the purposes of educational research it is worthwhile to differentiate in which category of identity we position our research.

Our research is focused on teacher identity, which we understand as a set of meanings that the teacher constructs regarding who he/she is and what social task he/she has; these meanings are assumed personally and as a group, on the basis of socially assigned cultural attributes. The teaching identity will be the result of the interaction between the personal experiences of teachers in the social, cultural and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis (Avalos, 2013).

The construction of the identity of university teachers is a complex process in which a number of important elements are involved. To address this complexity, we opted for a qualitative biographical-narrative approach, whose unit of analysis is the teachers' narratives. These narratives focus on the teachers' profession of origin, the teaching practice, the institutions and the disciplines to which they belong. Based on their discourses, we rescued their school and professional trajectories, as well as their experiences and teaching practices in order to approach their identity construction.

On this occasion, we report the findings found so far related to the construction of the teaching identity from its expression in the pedagogical practice. An important part of the teacher's pedagogical practice is related to the curriculum (Gimeno, 1995); this practice is developed through multiple processes in which different subsystems and functions are intertwined.

The teacher is an active subject of the curriculum who has the right and obligation to contribute his or her own meanings, and also has particular responsibilities as mediator, reproducer of culture, transmitter of values, norms and modeler of socialization. Therefore, knowing and understanding the way in which teachers re-signify the curriculum through their practice allowed us to understand how teachers construct a way of being and feeling themselves as teachers.

## 2. Development

In order to approach the understanding of the construction of the teaching identity of higher education teachers, we opted for the biographical-narrative qualitative approach.

Although qualitative methodology does not seek the generalization of data, it does allow an in-depth understanding of educational and social phenomena, it is inductive, naturalistic, with a holistic perspective of people and scenarios, and seeks to understand the individual from his or her own social, cultural and contextual frame of reference (Taylor and Bogdan, 1987). In its multiple traditions and methods, it allows understanding educational phenomena as a first step to transform educational reality (Sandín, 2003).

Of these traditions, the biographical-narrative approach is the most appropriate for our object of study, since narrative is an innate form of organization of reality through which subjects incorporate our culture; it is the way in which we construct reality through the organization of memory and human experience; we construct ourselves through life and life is constructed through narrative (Bruner, 1990). The narrative account is constitutive of identity since it emphasizes professional development, is in turn personal and gives entry to disciplinary transversality in the objects of educational study, so that the narrative can be both the phenomenon to be studied and the method to be used.

Therefore, from the set of methods of the narrative biographical approach we chose life stories, and as a tool for obtaining data the biographical interview (in some cases called narrative or in-depth interview), which were the ideal ones to understand the teaching identity as a set of subjectivized experiences and intertwined with the elements that make up the life of the teacher as an integral subject.

The life story is the story told by the subject literally, the subject uses the story to express the contents of a part of his lived experience and constructs his biographical ideology, which refers to the construction after a fact or event made by the subject (Bertaux, 1997, 1999).

We obtained six life narratives of professors from different disciplines working in public and private universities in Mexico. The professors who participated were chosen because they had been working for at least 10 years in one of the two institutions chosen -the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the Ibero-American University (IBERO)-, institutions chosen because they are recognized

for their quality, which implies the presence of consolidated professors who have remained in the universities for a long time.

In addition, the professors chosen represent three of the knowledge segments of Blecher's (1992) disciplinary grouping classification: from the pure sciences (physics and mathematics), from technologies (mechanical engineering and biomedical engineering), and from the humanities and applied social sciences (pedagogy and philosophy).

The disciplines from which teachers come from define to a large extent the way in which they construct their identity and relate to institutions, peers and students, which is why having a varied group of participants allowed us to approach different ways of being a teacher.

### 3. Findings: Teaching career and pedagogical practice

The following analysis is part of the domain corresponding to the professional trajectory of teachers, which addresses the results obtained regarding the pedagogical practice of the teacher and its relationship with the processes of teacher identity construction, from axes such as the curriculum, implicit theories and the relationship with students.

Among the most relevant findings, we find those related to the curriculum and lesson planning. In this regard, the participants emphasize the importance of academic freedom in their practice, in which the meanings acquired by teachers explicitly or during their training and others resulting from their experiences (Marrero, 1993), which allow them to make decisions on how and what to teach, become relevant.

Within this hierarchy of priorities and skills for teaching, the design of teaching situations that promote management and entrepreneurial skills in students is noteworthy. The development of competencies allows positioning graduates in labor markets in which technical skills allow them to develop with high efficiency, generating new projects with autonomy (Aldana, Tafur, Gil, and Mejía, 2019).

In the specific case of engineers, professors highlight the importance of the development of written and oral communication skills. For engineering students, the most worrying aspects in the development of reading and writing skills are those related to the general structuring of texts and the ability to express themselves in front of an audience, as a result of study habits that prioritize memoristic processes that limit the student to express his ideas fluently (Carreño, 2012), so the teachers' strategies respond to the need of students to develop in different work areas that require the management of various communication skills.

Another relevant axis in our analysis is related to the implicit theories of teaching and learning. Regarding the epistemological conceptions that teachers bring into play in the teaching process, these are integrated by a set of implicit theories that help teachers to make decisions about planning and evaluation (Coll and Miras, 1993).

These conceptions are fundamental for teachers because they define their classroom performance and how it relates to curricular content. In this regard, teachers articulate diverse knowledge from their disciplinary, curricular, experiential or practical training, built throughout their teaching career (Barrón, 2015). This knowledge is constructed and reconstructed by continuing or moving away from different theoretical perspectives, among the notions most present in our participants are those related to constructivist, cognitive and sociocultural approaches to learning.

It is important to clarify that, teachers' implicit theories are not pure and are intertwined with different notions about learning and teaching that the teacher has recovered and put into practice throughout his or her trajectory, in addition, these conceptions or epistemologies are very diverse, are mixed and sometimes are not clear or explicit for them.

On the other hand, there are different elements in our results that show the subjective experience of teachers, related to experiences, situations, relationships and practices that allow us to affirm that the identity of the teacher together with their pedagogical practice, are constantly changing and evolving, it is through experience and reflection that teachers modify or adapt different strategies and manage to incorporate diverse epistemological conceptions in order to build a way of being and feeling like teachers.

Among the challenges that teachers identify are those related to the diversity of students each semester, and how the incorporation of technology and the immediacy that this means, confronts them with different challenges in the classroom, specifically the attention to the so-called millennial generation, which represents the young population of the present, it is the generation born in the transition of the millennium change and the digital revolution (Area, Borrás, and Nicolás, 2015), so the strategies to capture their attention and achieve learning have posed a challenge to the participants within their teaching practice.

Part of the challenges expressed by the participants have to do with the closeness with the students, let us remember that for university students the characteristics of a good teacher-student relationship are mainly related to social elements, personalized, kind, trusting and communicative treatment, the

development of friendly and respectful environments, in addition, the treatment outside the classroom is important to promote better results in students.

The influence of teachers is decisive for students, since the construction of meanings by students about the reality that surrounds them and about themselves is related to the social and relational context in which they develop (Covarrubias and Piña, 2004). In this sense, students perceive the incomprehension, inflexibility and rigidity of the teacher as characteristics that disrupt the educational relationship; for some participants, the approach to students is complex, which they recognize as a challenge to achieve greater empathy and involvement of the student with the content and classes.

#### 4. Conclusions

The construction of identity is a multiple interweaving of elements and experiences, the findings of the research represent a window for the understanding of this construction that in the long term will allow us to know the relevant elements involved in this complex process, which enables the approach to the current situation of university classrooms narrated by one of its main actors.

The curriculum, as a category that crosses the identity construction of teachers, allows us to account for substantial elements of the pedagogical practice that professors develop through years of experience and that is transformed throughout their career, according to the new educational demands.

The importance of intertwining identity processes with the adaptation and translation of curricular content lies in the framework that the curriculum provides to the teacher's practice and the way in which this framework gives guidelines to the construction of different elements of identity, such as the relationship that teachers maintain with their students or the implicit theories on learning that teachers appropriate throughout their teaching career.

Giving voice to university teachers is necessary to achieve significant transformations thought and structured from the needs of the different university spaces and their actors, so narrative methodologies are a relevant alternative to achieve this purpose, because it allows teachers to relate and reconstruct their trajectory from the recognition of the importance of their work, generating a climate of trust and openness between teacher and researcher.

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