

Systematisation of Experiences: New paths to academic work in universities

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The social sciences we have inherited – its disciplines, methodologies, theories and concepts – do not reflect our times adequately and, therefore, we cannot trust them to guide us in the ongoing social transformation processes (Boaventura de Sousa Santos)

Abstract

This article presents systematisation of experiences as a proposal for the production of knowledge from and about educational, organisational, and social and community practices. It particularly highlights the interest arising from experiences in the field of University Extension. It is argued that systematisation of experiences in University Extension can help to strengthen the transforming commitment of the university work, and contribute to the production of academic knowledge informed by the richness of the economic, social, political and cultural reality in which the university is inserted. Concrete steps to implement the systematisation of experiences in the university context, based on his experiences at the Universidad de Costa Rica and others, are presented here.

Keywords: systematisation of experiences, university extension, social action, popular education, Latin America

La sistematización de experiencias: nuevas rutas para el quehacer académico en las universidades

Resumen

El artículo presenta la sistematización de experiencias, como propuesta de producción de conocimiento sobre y desde prácticas educativas, organizativas, sociales y comunitarias. Resalta particularmente el interés surgido en el campo de las experiencias de Extensión Universitaria. Se argumenta que la sistematización de experiencias de Extensión Universitaria puede contribuir a reforzar el compromiso transformador del quehacer universitario y, además, aportar en la producción de un conocimiento académico nutrido de la riqueza de la realidad económica, social, política y cultural en la que la Universidad está inserta. Basándose en su práctica en la Universidad de Costa Rica y otras, se presentan pasos concretos para llevar a cabo Sistematizaciones de Experiencias en el ámbito universitario.

Palabras claves: sistematización de experiencias, extensión universitária, acción social, educación popular, América Latina.

Introduction

The new challenges for the creation of knowledge, that we face when recognising the complexity of unknown situations presented by the current context, increasingly demand the renewal of approaches, categories and methodologies with which we work. This is due, on the one hand, to the need to fuel the processes of democratisation of knowledge, both regarding their production and their flow, which implies the recognition of the importance to rely on various viewpoints from different practices by various individuals; and, on the other hand, because it is fundamental to dig deeper and rigorously into the novelty of events produced by recent situations. This means the development of the ability to transcend the descriptive and narrative, in order to generate from it an interpretative and theoretical exercise, that goes beyond the mechanical application of predefined conceptual frameworks, and that also has, as a component, the vitality of the emotional strength. This openness to a personal and collective “sentipensamiento” means definitively, according to Fals Borda, a radical break from traditional positivism and adherence to its methodological rules, as well as a critical detachment from an individualistic and encapsulated production, which has been the dominant characteristic of the academic work .

It is thus a matter of looking at the source of these renewed processes of knowledge production: concrete experiences that are performed by collectives, social movements, institutions, research and social action teams, and others. In them and from them it is possible to deal with these new challenges and design relevant epistemological and methodological strategies. Let us look at a few characteristics of one of the proposals that have become more relevant in recent times: The Systematisation of Experiences (Jara 2013, Ghiso, 2010, Torres Carrillo 2010, Falckemback & Torres, 2015, Streck & Jara ,2015).

Systematisation of experiences, as a proposal for the production of knowledge about and based on educational, organizational and social and community practices, has become, since the nineties of the last century, a focus of interest in academic and non-academic circles, in public entities, in social movements, in non-governmental organisations or international co-operation agencies. We can highlight particularly the interest arising from the field of experiences from University Extension, also called Social Action or Social Projection at different universities in Latin America, with which we have had the opportunity to work in recent years.

A common concern in these practices involves the need to strengthen the production and flow of academic knowledge at universities, resulting from extension projects, programs and activities. Despite the recognised and too-often heard statement that extension is a substantive dimension of university work, equal to research and teaching, the fact is that it is not treated in the same way. It is still considered an area or dimension of lesser importance, even expendable