

Welcoming questions and uneasiness in higher education

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One of my daughters, Beatriz, is six years old. Unlike many children who are lulled by the movement of the car, she does not like to sleep on trips. Whether the journey is long or short, she goes along the road looking for reasons to stay awake. Watching the animals and landscapes, counting the cars, and singing songs are welcome distractions. Everything seems to feed her imagination, giving rise to infinite questions. On our last family trip, our minds were stretched as we tried to find answers to her questions: Are stick insects stiff? Do ants have blood? Do ballerinas have eye goop? Is there a star for everyone who dies? Can blind snakes climb trees? Can you hold a cloud? At each question, some uneasiness: Why, after all, do we take the world for granted?

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano commented on this attitude of children towards the world. For him, in childhood “we are all pagans”. Children view the ordinary with enchantment. They look at what is not usually looked at, at the small events that represent the abundance of the universe. Galeano’s writing involved “keeping one eye on the microscope, the other on the telescope”, as a way of intertwining micro and macro contexts; and to relate everyday events to the great changes we want to see in the world.

For me, social constructionism has been an invitation to uneasiness. By pointing out the centrality of language and relationships in the configuration of social reality, social constructionism makes us reflect on how we participate in the production of the world we live in. We are invited to analyze the political implications (relating to the common good) of our discourses and practices and, in this way, envision alternative futures. We also realize the importance of building dialogic contexts of interaction, which favor safe dialogues around sometimes challenging topics.

The quest to build dialogic contexts of interaction in higher education has guided my practice as a teacher for several years. I work with students who have passed very selective exams to enter public universities. However, perhaps because they were in competitive and individualistic evaluative systems for so many years, they ceased to view the classroom as a place to ask questions and (un)learn. Because of that, my role as a teacher has been to build dialogue and collaboration in teaching-learning contexts,

helping students to speak and ask questions that reflect their concerns and positions in the world.

In the last two years, I taught an elective online course entitled “Social Constructionism and Psychology”, , divided into two modules: one on the assumptions of social constructionism and one on practical examples of these assumptions. The program did not include any lectures. Rather, a text was suggested for each class, and students were asked to bring only their curiosities questions, personal experiences, connections with everyday life. In this way, the class consisted of an affective and spontaneous dialogue around the topics they considered relevant.

As the final assignment, students were invited to choose something they enjoyed in their daily lives and to reflect on how social constructionist ideas might relate to their experience. They wrote beautiful and creative self-reflection pieces about poems, works of art, movies and contemporary themes (i.e. gender, global warming, racism, social inequality). Usually, the assignments were followed by demonstrations of gratitude for the teaching approach and the dialogic environment created in the classroom – free and relaxed, but rich with relevant personal and social learning. For some, this was the least demanding subject, but the one into which they invested themselves the most. Despite Zoom fatigue, we managed to zoom in on our discomfort, and from that place, to reflect on our participation in the relational production of knowledge and, therefore, of the common good.

Inspired by Galeano, I believe that learning involves creating ways to recover that child-like enchantment of the ordinary, and thus building bridges between micro and macro contexts. In the photo that illustrates this text, my daughter Beatriz holds flowers at the top of *Serra da Canastra (Minas Gerais, Brazil)*, a scenery that reminds us of our smallness within the universe. Questions are like petals in the wind. When welcomed in safe dialogues, they can reach unimaginable places.