



## HYBRID NARRATIVE FOR DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY

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### **Abstract.**

*This article defines and discusses the role of hybrid narrative in constructing political and methodological alternatives to traditional university education<sup>1</sup>. It is thus triggered by the process of revising and revalidating the Eurocentric legacy which has structured higher education institutions, their discourses and practices in colonized nations as ours. In an attempt to overcome both an utter denial of such legacy and a helpless perpetuation of ties which reproduce prerogatives to favor a few, we have come across simple ways of restoring the unique perspective of the local identity in an institutional environment which fosters respect for conventions. The outcomes in terms of student production will be discussed and analyzed.*

**Keywords:** narrative; decolonial pedagogy; higher education

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### **Resumen.**

*Este artículo define y discute el rol de la narrativa híbrida en la construcción de alternativas políticas y metodológicas frente a la educación universitaria tradicional. Es por tanto motivado por el proceso de revisión y revalidación del legado eurocéntrico que ha estructurado a las instituciones del nivel superior, sus discursos y prácticas en naciones colonizadas como las nuestras. En un intento por superar tanto la completa negación de esa herencia como la supervivencia de los lazos que reproducen prerrogativas que favorecen sólo a algunos, hemos encontrado algunos modos sencillos de restaurar la perspectiva singular de lo local y la identidad particular de un entorno institucional que promueve la tradición y el respeto por las convenciones. Se analizarán las tensiones que surgen de estas tentativas, así como los resultados en términos de producción estudiantil.*

**Palabras clave:** narrativa; pedagogía decolonial; Educación Superior.



## **1 Introduction**

University education, as much of the rest of the educational system, has diverse ideological and political roots but is nonetheless clearly associated with the European tradition. Although originally leant towards the classical arts and studies seen through the religious lenses of the Christian church, universities as guilds of professors slowly underwent the process of modern transformation until they have recently become somehow *fixed* as institutions for the cultivation of science, the training of professionals, or both.

Of course, the very meaning of science as we understand it today was first to be bred, and was highly influenced by secularization and industrialization, urbanization and literacy, and the many characteristics of “new”, modern societies. It is during the nineteenth century, thus, that a new tale about the legitimate way of accessing Truth was finally manufactured, and science was conceived as the human enterprise to control and master nature through the use of reason. It was believed, as still is in many domains of science, that reason could penetrate the physical world, and assumed this world was somehow independent of the symbolic universe that “explained” it. This ontological stance was paramount not only in the definition of the interplay of science / human beings / reality but also in the possibility of conceiving knowledge as external to the minds and bodies- dissected now with the credibility and support to Cartesian theories (Ryan, 1999).

These assumptions which served as the foundations of modern science account for some of its main traits: the ambition for generalization (universalization), confidence in prediction and utter belief in the possibilities of “discovering” the “Truth”. The practice of science enjoyed much respect in the nineteenth century- encompassed by a strong belief in progress- and was effectively extended to the domains of social studies and the Humanities. However, it would be severely challenged in the following century.

The twentieth century defied almost every aspect of the scientific enterprise, beginning perhaps in the 1920's with the pragmatic discussions - or even before with the philosophical “speculations” of figures like Hume and Hegel stemming in turn from early western thought. As the practical effects of scientific development produced controversy and the study of man and societies revealed complex and intricate, the early contingency and provisional theses paved the way for even more radical questioning towards the end of the first millennium.

This article, in fact, is grounded on the ontological and epistemological challenges to science as a means of producing Truth fed during the long twentieth century but taken even further by Decolonial perspectives. The belief in the necessary human mediation in whatever is deemed ‘real’, the contingency of all knowledge and its collective ‘production’ have



thus fueled more historical and political discussions regarding the functional role of science in the configuration of contemporary geopolitics (Mignolo, 1999). If Modernity begins with the contact and immediate territorial usurpation of America, Africa and parts of Asia -and is actually possible because of the relationships established then-, the role of science in colonization becomes especially relevant. Long-term colonization required symbolic colonization- or coloniality as decolonial thinkers propose- and science has been perhaps the most effective European 'artifact' for the semiotic conquest of the rest of the world. Science based its efficacy, precisely, on the tale built about itself: a form of producing reliable, valid knowledge rooted on the beliefs in universal, timeless Truth, Reason and the existence of something 'out there' that could be made intelligible without subjective mediation. It was thus created without a body, a time or a place, as a kind of omniscient fiction which has been described by Castro Gómez (2005) as Hubris of the Zero Point.

This brief reconstruction of the development of science and the role it has played in the configuration of the contemporary world attempts to throw light on university practices, especially regarding 'theory'. Theory is the name given to scientific "truths" which may not be seen as final or conclusive today- but inevitably as contingent and provisional- but are nonetheless taken as valid.

In the context of education in general and higher education in particular, theory means much. It is used to signal legitimate narrative, that which has been produced and accepted by the scientific/academic community and is worthy of special consideration. The students "read" theory, attend lectures on theory, analyze theory, "study" theory and many times "recall" theory in exams to obtain credentials for the academic or professional fields. Occasionally they are even asked to "defy" theory and to produce some on the grounds of such exercise. In all cases, theory remains unchallenged as reliable and valid knowledge, and perhaps it should remain so. Even if we distrust "discovery", "Truth" and universalization, science as a complex and flawed human endeavor may nonetheless be a reasonable means to producing clues and hints for the expansion of conscience, which may in turn lead to emancipation and contribute to human well-being or happiness. What the academic communities have produced- in the educational field, in this case- may be seen as a treasure worth sharing among those devoted to gain greater understanding of an academic domain.

However, the "management" of theory in higher education scenarios does not always lead to the great benefits described above. This seems to be especially true in the early stages of university life, when the students are induced into the *habitus* of the particular academic field (Bourdieu, 2012). In such circumstances, theory looks encrypted, it is



detached from ordinary experience, divorced from the interesting questions and human problems for which it was created, presented without a body, a place and time, as if knowledge could be produced from no-where. In other words, that humanity has produced- some human beings, actually, for some reason in some time and place- is deprived of all meaning and thus presented as a corpse, a piece of inert, inanimate matter.

The methodological consequences of this treatment of theory are usually translated as student failure, student apathy and student lack of capacity. The political consequences, however, are much more serious, since the students learn there are different kinds of narratives and only some are legitimate: those ones which they cannot access because they are beyond their scope of experience. This is a dangerous lesson to learn, one which removes the political urge from the individual, nullifies his agency. And thus, it fuels coloniality by perpetuating the symbolic conquest modern science has exercised on consciences by presenting itself as a supra-human enterprise.

This article aims at justifying and describing a simple academic practice which intends to decolonize and re-found the meaning and value of theories, by purposefully shortening distances between the great theories and ordinary existence. Bridging this artificial gap will contribute- we believe- to the demystification of knowledge legitimacy and the political involvement of freshmen in the debates which must include them.

The first part of the article deals with the meaning of narrative and its dimensions; then we move onto describing the decolonial drive to approaching higher education, and finally we quote some narratives which seem to accomplish the intention of revising and recreating conditions for deep learning and political involvement in teacher education. The article is closed with some reflection for further dialogues.

## **2 Narrative as habitat**

The value now placed on narrative in the field of educational research is unrivalled. With the emergence of the linguistic and hermeneutic turns, mostly in the twentieth century, came along a growing concern for overcoming the restrictions positivist science had posed on the study of mankind. Free from the belief in the existence of human capacities to reach what is real by some external means, science had to acknowledge that mediation in the experience of such reality meant lower ambitions to access a single Truth and greater interest in understanding multiple truths and the grounds for their foundation. Nothing would be as interesting-from that moment on- as the meaning human beings ascribe to their lives and how these meanings provide clues into understanding, and transforming, human experience.



In educational research, narrative has been extensively used to learn about the construction of professional teacher identities (Schön, 1983; Goodson, 2003; Goodson et al., 2012; Fernández Cruz, 2013), to enquire on the nature and foundations of some educational practices (Clandinin y Connelly, 1995; Clandinin y Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2011; Downey y Clandinin, 2010; Huber et al., 2004; Mc Ewan e Egan, 1988; Suárez, 2007; Suárez et al., 2005), and to reconstruct the biographies of great professors to find clues for teacher education (Álvarez et al., 2010; Álvarez et al., 2014).

However, narrative was a scientific resource even before the turns mentioned above reverted the tide in favor of more human- and humane- means of producing knowledge; whenever a scientist formulated a hypothesis, defined the objectives of a research project or discussed the results of an experiment, he or she was building a narrative as a necessary means to conveying meanings which were-nonetheless-thought to stem from some external source of wisdom. In other words, language has always mediated human experience and the construction of any kind of knowledge- in positivist and all other approaches and methods- has always been inevitably bound to the possibilities and restrictions a particular language has to offer.

If narrative- as we claim- has been an enabling and limiting factor for all human endeavors, including science, since the dawn of mankind, we should account for what has changed as the linguistic and hermeneutic turns inaugurated a new phase in knowledge production. The awareness of such mediating role has been a blow to human ego, on the one hand, and a reason for digging into the human experience in search for meaning, on the other.

We now think people base their practices on the beliefs they hold, which are manifested as complex matrixes of hybrid theses about the world in which scientific knowledge is interwoven with experiential, intuitive and practical insights in a fabric which provides reasons for understanding discourse and behaviors (Porta y Yedaide, 2014).

We inhabit the narratives we speak, since they support our existence as webs of meaning which make everything else intelligible. Though meanings – as Angenot (2012) claims- are not limited to language (we may say something about a phenomenon while we mean it differently through social practices), narratives carry the foundations of the semiotic universe that defines ourselves and the world around us. Stories construct us, subjectivize us in terms of Foucault (1968), and we construct reality through the stories we choose to tell and the words we silence.

No single person can claim authorship or originality over any narratives; as Bajtín (2011) has made clear, every utterance is a response to all previous utterances and constitutes a link in the chain of human speech. Stories are personal and social, as mankind. When we access the world of meanings through any particular narrative we are also disclosing the



social and common meanings constructed in relation to the object of our exploration.

A more psychological stand, although rooted in social constructivism, describes narrative as *narrativity*, i.e. a human ability to speak his world and construct the semiotic scaffolding for securing survival in the process. Bruner (1993) claims that human beings manufacture stories to make peace with whatever is alien to them. We use narrative to engulf the foreign element into the canonic narrative; the stories thus allow us to incorporate the new into the old.

This second, more restricted meaning of narrative is still more ambitious than the colloquial use of the word, which refers to the use of language, or discourse –though much can be said in favor of their distinctive nature they will be taken as synonyms here- to engage in meaning making.

The struggle for meaning, we will claim, is the supreme social struggle since it implies the conquest of the hegemony and the privileges that come along with it.

It is crystal clear by now, we assume, that narratives are a natural, human capacity to build meanings which are, in the end, what we get to know about the world. They do not exercise a monopoly over the human capacity to mean, but they do play a role into social transformation. Because narratives are threads, sometimes they are indistinctive in the fabric they make. This may lead to the illusion of a cohesive whole and thus discourage political action to identify the parts and decide if they should ever be reconsidered.

Theory as it has been depicted earlier, in the game of university education, appears as such cohesive cloth that it cannot be reknitted with the personal, experiential threads. This fictional view of narrative- we claim- deters involvement and commitment.

### **3 Decolonial thought and decolonial pedagogy**

Decolonial pedagogy is a narrative which cannot certainly escape a permanent state of revision; as critical pedagogy, its very nature calls for ongoing questioning and helpless review, as an attempt to slip out of the fossilization or naturalization it denounces. It is brought to this article as a conceptual set of tools to promote reflection and deep thought on our particular scenarios, their historical circumstances and the possibilities they offer for rational upheaval and intellectual rioting. The reader should observe that the use of the word intellectual here does not neglect practice; on the contrary, we will base our arguments on the ontological thesis which claims that thought is a human *practice* to make the world intelligible.

Thus, we believe pedagogy is not a discipline that studies teaching and learning but actually *a social practice which produces meanings*. We expect the reader realizes the huge distance between both definitions; a discipline appears as a set of fixed theses and knowledge and its study



implies restricted agency, since the role of the subject is limited to observing that which exists. The belief in pedagogy as a social practice, on the other hand, acknowledges the full political agency of the subjects involved in producing certain narratives- carved on a particular place, time and body- which are necessarily bound to such geo-politics. The fiction of an omniscient knower is thus challenged and defied. It is replaced with tales that have to be taken for what they are, and fall inevitably into the provisional and the contingent.

Therefore, we could claim that decolonial pedagogy is alternative political action for the interpretation of education in different communities, which respects the singularity of each scenario and empowers subjects to recover agency over their lives. The methodological dimension of education- already questioned in critical approaches- becomes as trivial as any form of technology eventually is. Meaning, motivation and criteria are far more complex and challenging in human and educational terms than the many tools which may come handy to solve particular situations.

In regard to the sources of decolonial pedagogy and its alleged divide with critical pedagogies, much should be argued. Although the critical theory is bound to Eurocentric thought by its origins, the development of its theses mainly in the twentieth century- as it drifted away from more orthodox stances- is due to the convergence of narratives and moves from other parts of the world. Nothing has remained pure, if it ever was. By the time critical theory bred critical pedagogy, actually, the work of Fanon and Cesaire, the claims by the school of Frankfurt and the intellectual communities of respondents to such claims- even Freire- had already been integrated into alternative narratives for education. Critical pedagogy in the twentieth century retained the belief in social construction and the vocation for non-identity, for the denaturalization and questioning of all the issues which are presented as given, unchallenged. The political drive against conformity and the urge to contest social phenomena have remained and guided critical pedagogy to the outskirts of formal education and into the world of culture and the industries of conscience production (Enzensberger, 1984). And as Sulbaltorn, Postcolonial and Cultural Studies have denounced the intellectual and scientific enterprises of legitimate knowledge production- along with the struggle of feminist studies, queer and other ethnic or social 'minorities'- critical views have become more sophisticated, reaching the domains of linguistics, literature, the movie industry, and even video games and the world of publicity (Silberman Keller et al., 2011). Critical pedagogy today is revising every other narrative in the world in search for conceptual tools which can aid its goal of emancipating suffering human beings from symbolic and material constraints over their minds, which curtail their possibilities for transformation.



Although decolonial pedagogy also claims to be rooted in Fanon and his mentor, Aimé Césaire, and fueled by the wars of territorial decolonization and alleged independence of colonized peoples as well as by the narratives produced by the collective efforts of the groups already cited, it attempts to find some room for definition outside the scope of European tradition. Thus, in the late twentieth century, a group of intellectual Latin-American thinkers engaged in the construction of the Modernity/Coloniality Program, a systematic approach to not just discussing but reinventing narratives for the Latin-American people and their fate. A necessary step towards the abolition of Eurocentric symbolic and material ties consisted in the possibility of breeding something from the South to the South. In other words, a new urge developed to break free from European traditions – critical theory included- in order to regain the possibility of instituting new meanings, created in the very local spots in the native languages.

The challenges have been many. To begin with, the utter denial of Eurocentric views would imply the denial of the hybridity that has resulted from an imperial past and the refusal to acknowledge the living presence of such legacy. Then, it also leans towards essentializing the local traits and re-founding frontiers of a new kind (Said, 1996), which make it hard to give proper visibility to the new despotic elites that each nation produced in its own time and which continued the rule of the European after they were gone (Said, 1996). The on-going imperialism and endless subjection seems to be more related to a sort of artifact which secures material control through unchallenged and almost imperceptible cultural colonization than to a people like the European, provided they existed as such. Although it is true such artifact was manufactured on the basis of the abominable abuse of raw materials and manpower - and the destruction of life in America, Africa and Asia-, and the functional intellectual conquest which secured such privileges even after direct military control was withdrawn, this European origin has turned into a more diffuse source nowadays.

The past prerogatives with present effects are clear enough to justify emancipation but too blurred to signal a true human culprit unless we fall into the fallacy of essentializing people. We seem to be fighting not against a particular ethnic community or race but against the constraints the capitalist machine has posed – and permanently poses- on our minds and spirits. Decolonial pedagogy is, then, not so far from its critical counterpart.

Both decolonial and critical pedagogies promote material and symbolic non-conformism and trespassing of the frontiers which prevent peoples from embracing what belongs to them. The use of hybrid narratives could thus be understood as a critical and decolonial attempt to empower personal narratives as they are fused with more legitimated narratives in the academic field.





#### **4 An experience in decolonial pedagogy through narrative**

Narrative is commonly used in academic settings, in this broad connotation we have been using throughout the article. It is not only unevenly distributed but also classified in such a way that some forms of saying (and writing) are preferred- and thus enforced formally and casually- over others. Not all tales enjoy the same status or degree of legitimacy. We are committed here- as it has been stated too- to possibilities of demystifying the particular construction defined as 'theory'.

Such demystification began already, as we have attempted to disclose the moments and reasons for the construction of the current meaning of theory in academic settings, in intimacy with modern science. Now we will turn to the description of a simple academic exercise which proved useful in crossing borders and restoring student agency in knowledge production.

The experience whose narratives will be now shared developed in a freshman course at the State University in Mar del Plata, Argentina. To receive a diploma as an English, Geography, Language, Philosophy, History or Documentary Professor, the students must complete a number of courses organized and delivered by the Department of Educational Sciences. These courses, or subjects as they are called, are concerned with providing the foundations for teaching practice and complemented later with specific courses related to the particular disciplines.

"Problemática Educativa" is the name of one of these four common subjects. It is difficult to provide an accurate translation of "problemática", since it does not mean "problem" but rather the capacity to turn anything into one. In other words, the course aims at denaturalizing educational discourse and practice and revisiting the genesis of their construction. It is clearly – and explicitly- a move in the direction of critical and decolonial pedagogies.

In this course, however, the organization of the curriculum is not particularly critical or decolonial, but rather traditional. As Bourdieu has so well explained, the field greatly conditions the relationships in it, and radical non-conformity means eventual necessary exile (Bourdieu, 2012). There are general classes – called "theoretical" classes- which are commonly associated with the chairman's lecture- and smaller classes called "practical" which may vary in their dynamics depending on the professor but are the same in the possibility of addressing the students more personally.

In all cases, "theory" is seen as the great concepts, ideas or categories which – mediated through published sources- guide and reference the class discussions. The explicit intention is stated in the syllabus: the



students should become familiar with the important authors and ideas that have contributed to the field of education. The implicit assumption is that such “theory” will be somehow assimilated by the students and thus empower them to think deeper and better about teaching. In practice, theory becomes detached from other forms of knowledge and experience, unless the precepts this theory proposes are used in explicit dialogue with other more local, personal and intuitive theses.

The following extracts from students work illustrate an attempt to produce such merge. They are all labeled by a code to ensure confidentiality and have been written originally in Spanish and translated into English by the authors of this article. The words in bold are concepts presented as “theory” and now integrated into personal ways of understanding the teaching experience. We call these *hybrid narratives*:

Most of my teachers were **technicist** or **academicist**; only a few promoted **critical thought** or triggered transformation. However, I agree with **Mc Laren** in that they should all be “critical intellectuals capable of asserting and practicing the discourse of freedom and democracy”. Besides developing a **curriculum as cultural politics**, [these teachers] should create educational spaces where all the voices are heard, where the **domination practices** are given **visibility**, (...).E45

In this process of education I am beginning I would lean towards a professional model capable of creating student consciousness that merges the contributions of both **critical** and **decolonial pedagogy**. I find it imperative that the conquest of America is understood from an early age not as a pacific process but as the genesis of **symbolic dependency** and native cultural destruction. (...). E41

When I think of this experience now from the perspective of **heteronormativity**, what the teacher did was probably unintentional; she applied stereotypes when she assessed the situation” E52

As I try to relate what I have read to my personal experience in high school I believe I can recognize those teachers that were present in my schooling experience more as pedagogical employees than as **transformative intellectuals**. (...) What my high school experience shows is that I was never prepared for **questioning dominant school policies**”. E66

Professors, and people like us that are being educated to become professors, should recognize the complexity implied in teaching but never stop thinking of the infinite possibilities to **transform** such reality. E27

Hybrid narratives like these make use of the first person singular and thus show the agency we have been advocating for; they imply a necessary



personal stance, a genuine assessment of the pertinence and convenience of a concept for the own life. These narratives dialog with more sophisticated, and more legitimated, ones; they secure frontier trespassing and guarantee involvement.

## **5 Conclusions**

Human beings live in, and by means of, narratives of many kinds. Some of these narratives have been awarded a certain status at some time, in some place, by some people. What we call “theory” today is an example of legitimate narrative, a special one since it brings along political consequences in people’s relationship with their environments.

In educational settings, theories appear encrypted and detached from other kinds of stories, and thus prevent students’ empowerment, since such distance with more intuitive or experiential forms of knowing hinder political involvement.

We have tried to demystify the privileged nature of theory by restoring its historical nature as a counter-hegemonic intellectual move. But we have also provided evidence of a very simple educational practice which defies the prerogatives of the kind of knowledge labelled as theory by promoting its mixture and interplay with other kind of theses.

We hope this exercise, which may be too simple in its formulation but still politically novel in its intention of legitimizing other forms of knowledge by placing theory at a subservient level, will inspire other pedagogic practices that enable us to become fully emancipated from the traditions that nullify our political agency and thus curtail our potential for genuine human fulfillment.

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