

# HOW TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY UNIVERSITY

## ¿CÓMO RELACIONARNOS EN LA UNIVERSIDAD DEL SIGLO XXI?

María Teresa Rodríguez Wong\*, Yamila Roque Doval\*\* and  
Maitie Rodríguez Wong\*\*\*  
Universidad Central Marta Abreu de las Villas, Cuba

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### ABSTRACT

The article supports proposals from the teaching experience and research, regarding emancipatory relationships among teachers and students based on the use of group and collaborative relational and communicative practices. From the standpoint of historical and cultural references, the article insists on the need to dismantle the traditional culture of universities, and to develop intersubjective practices based on respect, symmetry in relationships, affectivity, and collaboration. The feasibility of groups as a foundation for this change in educational institutions is debated. Finally, these proposals, developed from social psychology, are linked to the collaborative learning model.

**Keywords:** relational practices, communication, groups, education, collaboration

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### RESUMEN

En el artículo se fundamentan propuestas, provenientes de la experiencia docente y la investigación, sobre modos de relación de naturaleza emancipatoria entre profesores y estudiantes sustentados en el uso de prácticas relacionales y comunicativas grupales y colaborativas. Desde referentes histórico-culturales, se argumenta la necesidad de quebrar la cultura tradicional de las universidades; y desarrollar prácticas intersubjetivas con base en el respeto, la simetría en las relaciones, la afectividad y la colaboración. Se argumenta la factibilidad de los grupos como base para este cambio en las instituciones educativas. Por último, se vinculan estas propuestas, desarrolladas desde la psicología social, con el modelo de aprendizaje colaborativo.

**Palabras clave:** prácticas relacionales, comunicación, grupos, educación, colaboración

\*mariarw@uclv.edu.cu

\*\*yamilar@uclv.edu.cu

\*\*\*maitie@uclv.edu.cu

*No one teaches anyone, no one learns alone, people teach  
each other, mediated by the world.*  
**Paulo Freire**

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a complex, intense and demanding activity for all involved, regardless of their roles. In the case of education as an instituted action, it must develop the people's and groups' ability to interact with each other and with their environment in an effort to promote the subjective welfare, the development and optimal use of psychological (cognitive, affective, relational) potentials and thus the realization of individual and collective goals. However, education, in spite of its ancient origins and of having instituted itself as a science, still faces diversity and even dichotomy regarding essential aspects: What are the best methods? What is being taught? Who can/should do it? Additionally, post-modern society identifies new problems: the world economy crisis, the inability of political systems to face this crisis and the repercussions of it on human behavior at the macro and micro-structural, institutional, group and individual levels. For this reason, the university as an institution is immersed in a period of rupture with the past and devoted to the development of a different social subject, which forces us to question ourselves: what kind of university do we need? What kind of teachers and students? What new relational and communication practices?

The World Conference on Higher Education (HE) was held in Paris on October 5-9, 1998. Here, essential aspects were established for the next 20 years. Among

them, autonomy, social responsibility, the use of new technologies in education, among others, which have become challenges for higher education.

Consequently, we must question ourselves: what is the educational philosophy needed for the 21st century paradigm? Even though there are no single answers for this, we consider that a valuable approach is the paradigm of continuous education, considering that the human being is educated while living and thus, life and education are two inseparable processes. From this starting point, a set of higher education principles is set. In our work, we will assume the following:

1. Education shall create guidance that prevent the individual from getting influenced by ephemeral information currents, so he/she can be able to identify a sound path towards individual and collective development.
2. In order to satisfy its social function, education must take advantage of the possibilities offered throughout life and consider the advances from science, the new forms of economic activity and the new social dynamics. It must also develop understanding of the other and perception of the interdependence forms (its history, traditions and spirituality) when working on common projects and preparing to overcome conflict, in order to cultivate values such as pluralism, mutual understanding and

peace. Finally, contribute to the growth of a mature personality that allows the individual to act with autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility.

While we don't intend to provide definite proposals to that end, we share insight, experiences and principles that we consider useful for the education of active, creative subjects, who are capable of critically transcending their daily lives. We support proposals, systematized over a period of more than 5 years-worth of research in the subject-matter (Alonso, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez, 2013; Domenech, Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2013; García, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez, 2013; Guerra, Rodríguez, Rodríguez, & Fimia, 2011; Rodríguez, 2007) for the articulation of emancipatory practices, from the standpoint of psychosocial analysis in education.

### **Education: heightening intersubjective situations that foster development**

How to solve what could be called the fundamental contradiction of the teacher? The teacher must teach and assess mostly pre-defined contents, behavioral modes, values, etc., but at the same time knows that students learn better when they get more involved in formative activities, when the possibility to participate actively in its construction is heightened and positive life experiences are structured around them. We are called, additionally, to educate from emancipating and heightening referents of collaborative practices and not ones from isolation and competitiveness, but this implies overcoming ingrained cultural practices: the teacher, as the sole source of expertise, designs, controls and decides, while the student complies, executes, and assumes. Even the spatial idea predominating in the classrooms is oriented towards supervising not collaborating.

In following the genetic law of cultural development proposed by Vygotsky, it will be understood that everything that is learned (values, attitudes, rules, etc.) must be practiced before among the participants of the educational process (mainly students and teachers), at the different levels of social structuring: at the institutional, group and interpersonal level. Progressively, this will have an impact on the collective and individual subjectivity, to the extent that it is realized from social situations significant to the subjects involved, both from the more traditional activities in class, and from others also vital for education: research, university outreach, even the use of free time that is frequently spent inside the university campus. For this reason, we consider that education must:

1. Be oriented towards the structuring of development social situations (SSD, in Spanish) that work in the Potential Development Zone (PDZ, in Spanish) of students, in the search for articulation (contradictory, conflictual, dialectic) of their needs, prior knowledge, motivations, etc., with the principles that society seeks to perpetuate, reflected in the curricula in the form of goals, values, contents. From the Vygotskian perspective, we understand SSD as the organization of the social environment of the subject, the starting point of dynamic changes occurring in the development, from the social activity (relationship), the main source of this. In close connection to this, there is the ZDP, defined by Vygotsky, as the perspective possibility of development, the distance between real development and potential development, accompanied by the adult or by the multiple forms in which the other appears for the subject, so that the systematic education has to work based

on the potential development of the ZDP (Pérez-Yera, 2002).

2. Foster educational projects articulated with the pre-conceptions of subjects, considering that they are built not only or mainly at school, but, to a greater extent, in the family and daily context.

In order to structure the educational activity as mentioned before, we need to rethink (among other things) the modes of relationship and communication established by the participants of the formative process, particularly the role of the teacher who ultimately leads the activity, since learning and personal growth are a result, largely, of the relationship established by the subjects, hence the depth and prolongation and significance of the same are main parts in the shaping and development of the individual's personality.

### **Horizontal relationships and dialogic student-teacher communication: notes to solve the cultural paradox**

In the study of human relationships, its emotional-affective nature can be distinguished, described mainly as Interpersonal Relationships (IR), together with its strong social conditioning, treated as Social Relationships (SR). It has been highlighted as a distinctive characteristic of the IR that they occur and develop based on certain feelings, generated in people in a mutual relationship. The number of these feelings is unlimited but they can be identified in two large groups (Andreéva, 1984):

1. Conjunctive, those who join people. In each type of such relationships the other part acts as a desired object, in relation to which the disposition to collaborate, to act jointly is shown.
2. Disjunctive: they separate people, when the other part appears as unacceptable, even

as frustrating object, in relation to which the desire to collaborate does not occur.

The author herself insists in the articulated form in which these type of relationships are developed with the SR based mainly on social criteria that rest upon roles, status, social expectations and control mechanisms developed by groups and societies. So that there is a strong interpenetration between roles, social representations, stereotypes and the type of emotional affective bond that we establish with people, since they are always playing some role more or less instituted: partner, mother, friend, doctor, director, and teacher.

In the case of teacher-student relationships, we consider of utmost importance to break the cultural heritage of teacher-decider vs. student-executor. The relationship of the teacher with his/her students needs to be personalized, and in such every student shall feel that he/she occupies a specific place, that he/she is understood and that said teacher can be trusted to express oneself, contributing to the personologic development (Ojalvo, Kraftchenho, González, & Rojas, 2003). This is the cornerstone for the formative activity to become a dialectic process of co-construction of subjectivity of the individuals involved, in which the educator leads and co-constructs the structure of the teaching-learning process with the student. The following are considered as the basis of this type of activity:

1. To move from prior knowledge to new knowledge, but in this stretch to reflect on what is known and suspect of new knowledge, not in the sense of a cognitive relativism, but in the sense of questioning the pre-established, of seeking, finding out, investigating, exercising thought, setting in motion the logical and psychological mechanisms (Roque, 2007).

2. To establish teacher-student relationships that are less asymmetric, strengthened from the expertise and referent power of the teacher and not from the authority that is inherent to the legitimate role or power, establishing feelings that are essentially conjunctive, incorporating affective elements in the communication processes that influence the mutual perception, so that the students feel comfortable and empowered to assume confrontation, debate processes with the responsibility of not only knowing, but creating and rethinking new perspectives in the learning process.
3. To enhance the dialogic communication, assuming that the education seen as the meeting of interlocutor subjects looking for the significance of meanings is not the transmission of knowledge from one subject to another, but its participation in the act of understanding (Freire, 2000). It is a communication done critically and that must, thus, be understood as an open process of mutual enrichment among participants.
4. The role of the teacher must be restructured from the pedagogical leadership, as the figure guiding the education process and causing the students to be more active and responsible. It is even desirable that the teacher questions from the dialogue established with its students, the successes and failures of its own formative activities, so that they may progressively be directed from more participatory bases.

### **Empowering the collective subject: potentialities of group mediation in education**

Another principle that we consider useful in the transformation of the modes of relationship and communication in education, is the use of groups

as mediators of the formative activity. They are a usual socialization space; and since education is an undoubtedly social activity the need to organize its daily relational and communicative practices so that they privilege the group is evident, in an effort to articulate interpersonal, intrapersonal and social levels.

Additionally, we recognize several potentialities for education in group mediation:

1. Unlike other elements of the educational process, such as curricular, assessments, etc., the development of groupality is a more dynamic and more adjustment-prone aspect. The establishment and development of group links shall be structured taking the existing cultural practices among the subjects of the activity as a starting point: its daily forms of relationship, the way in which they organize their activities, the roles that come up spontaneously, the communication media used, among others. That turns them into a pedagogical resource that can be co-constructed between teachers and students, can enhance the structuring of psychological senses and significant that mediate learning, as well as develop participation as a daily behavior mode. Regarding the development of participatory educational practices, Freire's statement is enlightening: The educator is different from the student. But this difference need not be antagonistic. The difference becomes antagonistic when the educator's authority, which is different from the student's freedom, transforms into authoritarianism (Freire, 2000).
2. The high socializing potential of groups is recognized and it is understood not only in the influence that it exerts on the subject, but also in the possibility that it provides as a space for behavior, self-expression,



- reaffirmation and acceptance, critical pieces in the permanent construction of personality. If the objectives of the group as collective subject (collaborative learning) can be articulated with those of education, it will benefit the participatory structuring of the pedagogical practices. In this sense, Engeström's contributions are critical; in his book published in 2006, he highlights the importance of the disturbances in the activity for the development and identifies the expansive transitions and the qualitative changes in the way of interacting, as a response to disturbances, facilitating the creative and enhancing level of Collective Areas of Proximal Development, something common in the collaborative learning environments.
3. The types of relationship, the rules, values, etc. that are practiced-structured in group pedagogical experiences may become progressively mediators of the values and modes of behavior that society intends to instill in the individuals, and, also, of the transformations that these intend for their society, energizing the society-individual relationship effectively.
  4. The group is a space for support, stability and transformation, an important foundation to face resistance to change. Thus, it acquires great value for modifying practices that are culturally intertwined in education. From groupality, it is possible for the students used to executing-complying-being assessed to assume active role in their training, to the extent that the joint work of the group members is the axis where the social and individual aspects converge; the space for building shared meanings, where each member is present

for the other, with its own subjectivity, but at the same time interacting with the subjectivity of its peer.

Group perspective, applied to education, helps enhance the social nature of interaction, while its correct utilization prepares and energizes attainment of educational objectives. However, it is worth noting that for them to achieve their mediating function, the groups must have an intention in the formative action, taking into consideration the psychological, social and didactic complexities involved. In regards to this, it is important to consider that this group process must stem from the legitimate acceptance of each member, achieving acceptable levels of communication and trust that allow for the giving and receiving of support in order to be able to make joint decision that benefit the consolidation as a team.

One of the educational group practices that we consider sound and suggest applying is collaborative learning (CL), since it enhances learning mediated by group activity, generating shared authority and acceptance of responsibility among its members for the group actions. Based on Prescott's thinking, CL seeks to promote spaces that foster the development of individual and group skills, based on the discussion among students when exploring new concepts, and where each one is responsible for their own learning. These environments are preferably rich in possibilities and should foster the group's growth. This is a way to overcome the academic problem posed by acquiring information, processing it, getting and adding new skills and knowledge.

### **Final considerations**

Higher education must overcome its modes of organization and relationships in order to be able to fulfill its social role in the complex social

Dynamics in which it's immersed. In order to obtain this, we consider the following as necessary:

1. To promote cultural changes oriented towards the transformation of the intersubjective teacher-student relationships, of the teacher's role who must be a co-builder of developmental social situations, mediator of meanings in these educational situations, stimulating the students to actively face life, to assume it as creative work.
2. Teachers and students must establish relationships considering that they are subjects of activity, with features that render them unique and different from their peers and protected by a systemic vision where each one is responsible for the other.
3. The use of groups as mediators of the formative activity, oriented from the principles of collaborative learning, may be a useful resource for the achievement of these types of relationship and communication.
4. The theoretical and methodological contributions of the Cultural Historical Approach, particularly the categories: Potential Development Zone, Social Development Situation, as well as the development genetic law and the role of the mediations in education are appropriate referents for the transformations in the educational activity called for by culture and society.

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