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Participation for transformative learning in development management: The case of a Master in international development projects in the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (Spain)

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Abstract

There is a growing concern about the role of the university in the education of international development professionals. For a number of actors, it should play a central role in order to move current managerial trends in the international development sector towards a more transformative and reflective practice of international development projects management. In the paper, we depart from the idea that postgraduate courses can promote the emergence of more critical and reflective professionals, if they assume participation as a key issue in the curricula and in the methodological approach.

We will deep into a particular case study, a Master in development management in the Universitat Politècnica de València. We will see how participation is considered at different levels, as a key pedagogical strategy, for the emergence competences for a reflective and transformative practice of international cooperation. We will also see the outputs of this Master in terms of the learning experienced by students in this regards, and we will address the limitations and opportunities that the Master faces in its strategy. Results are built on interviews to students, teachers and other relevant stakeholders, as well as in the results of external and internal evaluations and reports on the Master's performance.

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1. Introduction: Learning for critical thinking and practice in development cooperation management

There is a growing concern in development management about the role of the university in educating development professionals. Underlying the debate are clashing conceptions about what a development professional is expected to become and what are the core capacities that he or she needs to develop during education (Clarke and Oswald, 2010). Nowadays, mainstream university programmes in development cooperation management remain dominated by rationalist, non critical perspectives of learning and the production of knowledge (McFarlane, 2006; Gulrajani, 2010). University curricula are premised on linear processes of acquisition and subsequent application of a rational-modernist ideology, as well as on a blind faith in scientific and rational knowledge (Johnson and Thomas, 2007). As described by Peris et al. (2013), this perspective upholds that learning processes should equip students with the technical tools enabling them to deliver the most effective solutions aligned with development aims (Clarke and Oswald, 2010). Such approach aptly echoes the emphasize the managerialist ethos which currently underpins prevailing perspectives in the aid industry. Such perspectives put forth managerial, simplistic and purely technical solutions to problems of essentially political nature. As a consequence, power relationships are reinforced, and the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion remain unaddressed.

In this paper we argue differently. To do so, we draw on the notion that development managers should assimilate the complex nature of development processes – as embedded in power relations and shaped by political interests and influences (McCourt, 2008; Eyben et al, 2015). As Belda et al. point (2012), this calls for development managers to engage poverty politically. Doing so makes possible to unveil power imbalances, as well as to challenge widespread asymmetries of power, hierarchies and their ultimate expression, inequality. Engaging politically compels development managers to contest development discourses and the broader modernization projects sustaining them (Townley, 2001; Mosse, 2005). To put it differently, development managers ought to be mainly oriented to the common good (Walker and McLean, 2013; Boni-Aristizábal and Calabuig-Tormo, 2015).

According to our perspective, university programmes on development management would do better to focus on fostering a rich set of competences, namely: understanding and engaging with power; political analysis; navigating complexity; adaptation; and reflexivity (Pettit, 2010; Mowles et al., 2008; Clarke and Oswald, 2010). Such competences, crucial for a critical, transformative and reflective management of development aid, can be strengthened through comprehensive learning processes, and facilitated by means of a diversity of pedagogical methods and approaches. Specific examples abound (Fisher, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Ortiz Aragon, 2010, Pearson, 2010; Pettit, 2010; Soal, 2010), ranging from learning through personal experience to creative methods that appeal to the emotions and the use of the body.

Among the latter, participatory methods and approaches continue to be very relevant to modalities of learning conducive to critical thinking and practice amidst development managers (Pettit, 2010). Specially when participation is not regarded as exclusively instrumental, but also as a process of empowerment and personal and collective transformation for personal emancipation and for the construction of more democratic systems (Gaventa, 2006).

In this paper we illustrate this perspective by scrutinizing the case of the *Máster en Políticas y Procesos de Desarrollo*. The Master, hosted by the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (UPV), adopted its Bologna-adapted structure in 2011, as an evolution from an earlier *Máster Universitario en Cooperación al Desarrollo* that kicked off in 2007. Both Masters reflected the same pedagogic project, and will be subsequently referred to with a unique denomination, namely a- Master in development management (MDM). In our opinion, this case study exemplifies how participation may be incorporated across different arenas, especially when elevated to a chief pedagogical strategy towards developing critical competences in future professionals in the field of international cooperation.

2. The case of a Master in development management in the UPV: Participation as a key strategy for creating reflective and transformative development cooperation project managers

2.1. The Master

When inaugurated in 2007, the *Máster en Políticas y Procesos de Desarrollo* was conceived as a 66 European Credit Transfer (ECTS) degree, including a specialization in Development Processes and Project Management. The pedagogic proposal, the contents, focus and approach also inspired the *Máster Universitario en Cooperación al*

Desarrollo kicked off in 2011, an adaptation to the Bologna requirements of the previous Master. In its current form, the Master consists of a 90 ECTS degree, with a specialization in Development Processes and Project Management in the UPV. It combines a first year of learning in the UPV with a second year in which students embark upon an internship in Spain or abroad, coronated by a final dissertation.

The Master was promoted by the Department of Engineering Projects of the UPV, a technical university imbued with a rational and instrumental vision of the capacities that university students should acquire for their employability. The Master employs a staff of lecturers with a background in project management, who are supplemented by staff with a social science background as well as experience in development and international aid interventions. Since its inception, the Master has enjoyed continuous feedback from different evaluative exercises, from academic staff, students, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders. These insights have slightly reoriented the Master's curriculum and methods throughout the years.

2.2. *Research methodology*

This paper draws upon existing evaluation reports of the Master carried out by external consultants (Cascant, 2010; Frediani y Terol, 2011; Guijarro, 2012), as well as upon three studies undertaken by academic staff lecturing in the Master: Belda et al (2012), Peris et al., (2013) and Boni et al. (2016). The former carried out more than 30 semi-structured interviews to students, teachers, members of NGOs and other stakeholders from the aid sector. The interviews were supplemented with workshops with stakeholders, as well as with a desk analysis of a sample of dissertations and reports written by students.

2.3. *Participation in the Master: The strategy*

In its current form, the Master incorporates participation as a key strategy in a number of ways:

- Firstly, participation played a key role in the design of the curricula of the master's degree. Through different workshops and on-line discussions, development practitioners from a variety of backgrounds were queried about the desired knowledge, skills and values in a potential graduate of the masters. The results inspired a draft educational curriculum, subsequently submitted for peer review evaluation to university professors, lecturers and researchers in Europe and Latin America. This provided an invaluable feedback to elaborate a syllabus responsive to the requirements of both professionals and academics.
- Secondly, participation is an essential and defining feature of both the pedagogy and the teaching methodology. A rich array of participatory techniques are used for teaching activities in order to trigger collective discussions and deliberations in the classroom; participatory workshops, participatory action-research projects, or the use of art and drama are but a few examples of drivers of students' participation.
- Thirdly, participation is a key competence to be developed by the students, in a double sense: on the one hand, students must develop capacities for critical, responsible, reflective and efficient participation, as managers of development projects and processes, but also as students and as citizens in general; on the other hand, they must develop the competences for promoting community participation in development projects and processes. This is considered as a cross-cutting competence in most subjects of the Master's programme
- Fourth, participation occupies a preeminent space in the master's degree contents. It remains a cross-cutting issue in most of the subjects, which highlight the role of participation to conceptualizing development projects and processes. For example, participatory planning is paramount in the course of Development Planning; likewise, participatory action research has a key importance in the course of Research.
- Finally, participation plays a crucial role in the continuous evaluation of the master's degree. Thus, for instance: students frequently assess courses by means of small evaluation workshops; lecturers and students assess each module of the master by means of a quarterly Steering Committee; lastly, development organizations and the academic staff of the Master meet in the Advisory Board once a year to discuss the issues raised by the annual evaluations and recommend strategic actions.

2.4. Limitations and opportunities

However, the introduction of participation as a key issue, content, approach or technique remains a challenge. This holds particularly true given the academic culture in Spain as well as the nature of the development sector in Valencia (Peris et al., 2013).

Firstly, a long-held educative culture in Spain incites a passive attitude towards learning amidst students entering the Master. As a consequence, participatory and critical methodologies must secure legitimacy amidst not a few students, notably during the initial stages of the Master. Interestingly, students with a background as activists or members of grassroots NGOs, who tend to join the Master in sizeable numbers, tend to show the opposite attitude, and contribute actively to the participatory dynamics in the classroom.

Secondly, the Spanish university culture has since long nurtured a sceptical attitude– if not outright opposition - to participation. The negative consequences are rather practical. For example, the available teaching spaces at the UPV are unfit for participatory workshops. Also, many teachers are not familiar with participatory approaches and techniques.

Thirdly, the cooperation sector in Spain is characterized by bureaucratized organizations and agencies, which are essentially focused on the financial and technical management of their projects. This is in stark contrast with the approaches and contents taught in the Master. As a result, students tend to feel discouraged when they feel that the Master remains distant from the prevailing discourses in the Spanish development sector. Conversely, managerialized organizations in the sector tend to criticize the Master for not providing students with the competences that they cherish, and decry the focus on participation.

Despite the challenges, however, the academic staff of the MDM considers that participation is gaining more and more prominence and visibility not just in the aid sector, but also in university teaching and in public policies. Such consideration has turned into a source of legitimacy and prestige for the Master, which its directors have mobilized to its advantage, notably vis-à-vis the university management.

3. Impacts in learning of the use of participation

In spite of the limitations, a large section of the students express in evaluative spaces their appreciation of the relevance accorded to participation in the Master. In particular, they regard the Master as an educative process leading to empowerment as well as to acquiring the tools needed to encourage participation.

However, participation is emphasized by students not only as an educational result; it is also conceived as a crucial method and a driver for enabling active learning processes (Belda et al., 2012). Participatory methodologies are deemed to be crucial to assimilate core concepts and to enable self-reflective and critical thinking, particularly when such processes entail reflections on how power dynamics operate in the classroom itself.

Dynamics within the group of students are singularly telling. As regards such dynamics, two particular issues have played an important role. On the one hand, the diversity of students' profiles is acknowledged to encourage a more productive and critical learning through participation. However, and according to some interviewees, gaps between previous student knowledge and educative culture seem to generate particular power dynamics which undermine learning processes - as reflected, for instance, in inhibitions to participate in classroom debates. On the other hand, the master's promotes a variety of fora for critical participation and reflexivity - informal in nature, yet of major importance, such as spontaneous debates outside the classroom in different spaces (breaks, hangouts, etc.). These informal spaces clearly contribute to improve the quality of in-class participation and collective reflection by building ties of confidence among students.

Yet in another respect, students who throughout the Master's educational process are involved in development organizations feel that their experiences "outside" the course failed to be always capitalized "inside" the course by means of encouraging a reflection on the relations of their own experiences with the master curriculum. Although the experiences brought into the classroom by lecturers are valued as positive, students still consider that their newly acquired knowledge was not premised upon their previous experiences as development practitioners. Conversely, students do not always find it easy to apply what they learn in the development organizations where they work after completing the Master.

Lastly, and following the requirements of the Bologna framework, time schedules and calendars remain are very rigid, and as a result students need to attend a considerable number of compulsory hours of lectures. The latter has, paradoxically, limited the possibilities of students to participate in associations, NGO or local processes in Valencia, as some students regret.

4. Final reflections

Nine years after the inception of the Master in development management in the UPV, a number of lessons emerge:

- An effective and genuine inclusion of participation as a key approach in a Master programme entails its consideration across different levels: as content, as competence, as a cross-cutting issue, and as a technique for design and assessment. This may partially explain the interesting impacts in terms of the learning experienced by the students. Moreover, genuine participation may also help taking advantage of the potentialities and human capital of the Master, including the diversity of backgrounds, experiences and profiles among the students - a result of the fact that participation promotes exchange, dialogue and pair-to-pair learning. Yet there is still room for further improvements in the pedagogical approach. For example, to better connect the contents and activities in the MDM with students' daily work in NGOs.
- The previous attitudes of students, lecturers and the university as a whole towards participation may hinder the successful inclusion of participation as a key approach and driver of learning. However, and paradoxically, the environment in higher education is very dynamic in Spain, which entails emerging opportunities for experimentation with participatory approaches.
- The MDM is also constrained by the challenges of the Spanish aid sector, and in particular by the dominance of managerial approaches. Challenging this mentality, and introducing a more critical and transformative perspective on development management in the sector should be part of the mission of the Master. Educating a new breed of critical and reflective managers still remains a key strategy to that end.

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