

## Book reviews

**Esteban Bara, F. (2019).**

*La universidad light: Un análisis de nuestra formación universitaria [The light university: An analysis of our university education].*  
Barcelona: Paidós. 233 pp.

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Good directors know that the success of a film depends on the distance — the shorter the better — between their initial idea and the end result. It has nothing to do with the box office, which producers care about so much, or even with the tastes of critics and viewers. If they make what they intended to make, and at the time thought was a good idea, mission accomplished.

The book that interests us here — theoretical and readable from beginning to end, if I can allow myself the pleonasm or even oxymoron — encourages us to reconsider the distance between the idea and the outcome in the university sector from this perspective. Its title does not deceive us: in this case success, far from being guaranteed, is diluted, cloying, reduced, lacking in substance... ultimately light.

Esteban Bara sets out in general terms and accurately his concerns about the current direction of universities. As the author himself claims, invoking the great thinkers who have taken an interest in this very matter, universities offer society the gift of a period of time that, at least in theory, should be qualitatively different from other experiences.

A life within another life, essentially, one that teaches us — or should teach us — to consolidate this community of seekers of knowledge that have a sufficiently strong (id)entity not to be confused, ignored, or undervalued: «The gift of an interval that Oakeshott mentions is the time to dedicate oneself to the higher elements of the person as a person, and it is hard to find gifts that are more interesting and spectacular than this» (p. 56).

The book is structured in five different parts: 1) an analysis of the current status; 2) reflections on university life; 3) reflections on academics; 4) reflections on students, and 5) reflections on these institutions'

educational practice. All of these are as interesting as the epilogue which, as a summary, provides clues to help us identify whether we are in the presence of a *light* university, teacher, student, or practice.

Throughout just over 200 pages, in a style that is accessible but does not neglect academic rigour, this work exposes the practices and bad habits of those who do not know how to appreciate or make good use of the virtues true higher education offers. Unsurprisingly, the apathy and bad habits of some students — ever more foolishly immersed and spellbound in our classes with aspects that have little connection to what was planned and wished for — will become apparent, but so will those of the academics — not educators and sometimes only teachers — who turn up to their classes almost because they are obliged to do so and are incapable of spreading any love at all for their discipline, which they undoubtedly disrespect and harm. In the author's own words: «it is not enough for university teaching staff to be fascinated by what they do ... they must make their students fall in love with it, they must captivate them, and this very responsibility means that they are fascinated by what is in their hands» (p. 97).

Accordingly, while maintaining appropriate forms, and with a sense of irony that does not lack truth, the author encourages us to be *scandalous* teachers (e.g., p. 105) who can create educational situations from which our students cannot emerge unchanged; we should pity those students — and teachers — who pass through the

university without letting it pass through them!

Nobody should misinterpret this brave and necessary desire, since it is not a missile aimed at the university's waterline, but quite the opposite. It is a necessary reminder that the university must follow its own path, that of building the community of seekers of knowledge described above, without allowing itself to be led astray by other interests that are perhaps more pressing, more pragmatic and utilitarian, but are further from the idea of what a good higher education institution should be. Indeed, it is strange to think how the amorphous postmodern fluidity has led us to point where defending the Classics can be interpreted as a true act of rebellion against a university where the *customer* — that student we must motivate and please at all costs — is always right from the very first day.

Perhaps then we might also understand that when seeking knowledge *for the love of it*, we are also fundamentally and certainly seeking experiences and sensations that remind us and restore not only what it means to be alive, but also to belong to this select club of people who, when we want to do so and make the effort, can see further — and better — from the shoulders of those giants who came before us and who, if we respect them and give them the place they deserve, still walk by our side.

The pace of life of our societies, as dizzying as it sometimes is aimless, does not help or fit in with this vision of a university

that requires its own tempos and places. The book that interests us, among its many other gifts, provides an excellent opportunity to rethink the period of time university offers. Without rushing, but without lingering, as:

university education is not a matter of a single day, of months, or of a few years. The attitudes and aptitudes of this wonderful undertaking develop slowly and ferment gradually. In addition, and for this very reason, because we live in times of haste and rushing, we need people who are calm and collected, in the same way as in fluid times we need solid people and in ephemeral eras we need firm and stable individuals (pp. 149-150).

Indeed, this book is a real defence of the thought, feelings, and lives of those people who aspire to be the best versions of themselves, since this is in truth the ultimate aim of any educational process that hopes to boast of being higher. A version that will not be such if it is not shared by society. The author himself, while understandably focusing his defence of the university on the academic field, acknowledges that: «A complete university education involves recognising the other and, going further, recognising oneself in the other. Indeed, there is much otherness in the community of seekers of knowledge» (p. 189).

Strictly speaking, there is certainly no dispute that we have the university we have built, more or less consciously, over the centuries. Nonetheless, it is another story if we believe we are more or less deserving of our higher education institu-

tions. For those who believe we must have more successful universities, closer to the initial idea of what an ideal institution of higher education should be, these pages are essential reading.

This objective, improving the quality of universities, is as important as it is elusive and full of ethical twists and turns that are hard to measure and, far from hindering the undertaking, make it more attractive and exciting. What might be repulsive and repellent for some, for others is an irresistible bait. This could be because of the innate curiosity of people who know how much they do not know, and who, at the end of the day, know that Sisyphus smiles, happy for a new day full of challenges and efforts. Or it could be because someone who is educated, truly educated, does not fear exposure, steep slopes, disappointments, and hard times. Perhaps, and only perhaps, it is because the university ultimately exists for a purpose and is not just there by chance.

José L. González-Geraldo ■

**Ruiz-Corbella, M., & García-Gutiérrez, J. (Eds.) (2019).**

*Aprendizaje-Servicio. Los retos de la evaluación [Service learning: The challenges of evaluation].*

Madrid: Narcea, 206 pp.

Towards the end of the 20th century, a series of innovative educational projects started appearing in higher education in Spain based on the methodology now widely known as service-learning. As a re-

sult of these projects, Spanish universities have advanced greatly in knowledge and understanding of the world their students inhabit. This movement has, to some extent, involved setting aside certain traditional teaching approaches and moving towards a revolution in teaching-learning processes; towards the need to seek out new directions in which students play a central role in their own learning based around their lived experiences of encountering real situations and problems in their immediate environment.

The authors of the work reviewed here do appear to agree on one point: the need to implement service-learning projects that enrich students' learning on the basis of different activities that foster their civic participation as a tool for social change, creating an ethical commitment among students to the service they provide to the community.

In the context of the theory and practice of teaching, we encounter one of the challenges that affects our educational system: evaluation. Indeed, from the first moments after our birth, we are exposed to a series of evaluation tests. More specifically, this is our first contact with a method of evaluation, and without us knowing, this precise moment corresponds with the start of a life bound to what we now call *evaluation*. As the years pass, without us realising, we are submitted to different methods of evaluation every day, everything from medical tests to job interviews and university entrance tests. This led us to reflect on the need to search the scientific literature for works on eval-

uation processes and more specifically on the topic that interests us here: evaluating service-learning projects. This is the start of this challenge, more specifically, the challenge of all of the authors in this work, with an evaluation of this type of teaching-learning proposal to enable their analysis and so be able to improve them.

The book's editors, Marta Ruiz-Corbella and Juan García-Gutiérrez, work at Spain's Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) and both have numerous publications on this topic. In the text, they lead the reader through the academic literature on evaluation systems in service-learning projects. To do this, they call on a number of authors who are experts in this methodology from different Spanish universities and from the Latin American Centre for Service Learning (CLAYSS) in Argentina, a pioneer in this field in South America.

The contributions of the different authors are arranged in eleven chapters that focus on different aspects to consider when evaluating service-learning. In effect, when reading this work, we encounter numerous instruments for collecting information in all of the evaluation processes for projects and programmes implemented using this methodology. This makes it an excellent resource for readers who are starting out in research in this field, for ones who are already immersed in the specific scientific literature, and above all for ones who are developing a service-learning project or programme and are interested in knowing its effects on students' learning and on improving society.

In other words, it is an essential text for the integration of systematic evaluation processes in this methodology, something that is necessary to provide a more objective and well-founded vision of each of the service-learning programmes. Until now, as well as being one of the most complex research problems in the field, this aspect has not received sufficient attention, and so it is one of this book's principal innovative contributions. Hence the book's title.

Evaluation processes are necessary in every educational project or programme, but complying with this requirement often turns out to be no easy task. We should work hard to be able to adopt different standards of a certain quality, for their subsequent evaluation and, in so doing, be able to answer the five key questions in any evaluation process, which are set out and explained in this text: *what do we evaluate for?*, *what are we evaluating?*, *who evaluates?*, *when do we evaluate?*, and *how do we evaluate?* The success of any intervention project or programme lies in the structure of own design, in its planning and implementation, and in its subsequent evaluation, with a level of scientific rigour based on particular quality criteria and indicators.

The different chapters cover different forms of evaluation that in some cases complement each other, and in others focus on a specific dimension of learning or service, the choice of which, when evaluating a service-learning project, depends on the pedagogical focus underpinning the methodology. Among them, it is worth

noting participatory and self-managed evaluation, competence-based evaluation, hetero-evaluation, and self-evaluation, ex-ante evaluation, evaluation of ethical-civic learning, evaluation of institutionalisation processes, analysis of the impact of a service-learning methodology and its capacity to create change in its environment, and the use of instruments such as a rubric intended for self-evaluation and field diaries or notebooks for interpreting specific experiences.

Something else considered in this work is the evaluation of cross-sectional competences service-learning entails. When carrying out projects of this type, learning not only focusses on the service provided to the community but also on the acquisition of the social competences that implicitly shape the complete development of the students. As we are considering experiential learning, sensitivity towards society's real problems and with it, knowledge of the environment surrounding them will make a positive contribution to an improvement in students' ethical competence and civic engagement. To some extent, this takes us to see service-learning as a methodology that can develop students' skills relating to empathy, communication, participation, solidarity, critical thinking, and intercultural dialogue among others. Consequently, this leads us to regard this type of intervention programme as one that creates in-depth reflection and evaluation processes. This reflection allows all of the participants in service-learning to construct their own learning before, during, and after a project of these characteristics.

In summary, this work offers the reader effective guidance in the search for solutions to the problem of evaluating service-learning projects or programmes, from a pedagogical perspective, based on a broad range of literature. The service-learning methodology started being used in Spain in some form more than two decades ago, and although its use here has mainly been in higher education, further development is required in other educational stages. Starting implementation of these projects at younger ages will make it possible to achieve a greater social conscience regarding the need for students' professional and civic training. There is still much to do in educational research into service-learning and in proposals leading to an improvement in the field of educational innovation, but works like this one mean that there is still hope in scientific literature in Spain.

Andrea Muñoz Villanueva ■

**Laforge, L. (2019).**

*Recuperemos la escuela [Reclaiming the school]*.

Madrid: Encuentro. 266 pp.

In this book, Laurent Laforge, a French mathematician, presents an argument that invites us to reflect on the decadence of the current educational system, referring to the successes and achievements of the education of the past, more specifically the French secular republican schools. There is no doubt that improving education is currently a latent social concern, and so the attractive title and design

of this book invite the anxious reader to delve into its critical and, in some cases, controversial arguments.

The book comprises three parts that consider different topics: rebuilding the school; the passion for knowledge; and maths, content, and experience. Each part contains various chapters, which, using stories and references to the author's beliefs and feelings, identify the elements that have been devalued in favour of others that, in his opinion, do not favour a quality education.

In the first part, the author, based on his experience, presents the triumphs of the education he experienced and the elements that have been lost leading to the failure of school. He mentions different factors that have hampered the good operation of the school and have created a lack of solid foundations in areas such as students' reading, writing, and arithmetic. These include the rise of constructivism, which has replaced the systematic exercises and methodical learning that provided society with a well-founded knowledge of the content of the main disciplines. He also considers how mathematical disciplines are currently rejected as people do not understand them and also the decline of the humanities as they are not regarded as important and useful, ignoring their effect on the education of human beings and their liberty.

Based on the idea that the mission of education is instruction, Laforge rejects the competency-based learning paradigm, accusing it of seeking to programme people's



personal characteristics. Accordingly, he calls for a clear definition of the mission of education, the objective of which must essentially be to transmit knowledge. The author bases his reasoning on the view that other functions such as socialisation pertain to families and that tasks such as pursuing progress or attention to diversity distract the school from offering a quality education at the expense of its principal mission.

He therefore suggests that evaluation should exclusively concern knowledge, leaving aside other psychological factors, and he supports an initial exam to ensure students fulfil the necessary requirements with the aim of guaranteeing the recovery of solid foundations of knowledge. He also emphasises the need to develop new syllabuses that specify what knowledge students must acquire while leaving some degree of pedagogical freedom to the teachers.

The author also rejects the so-called educational sciences, which he does not regard as scientific and accuses of taking control of teaching away from what he calls true scientific disciplines. In consequence, he argues that the training teachers receive is not suitable as it focuses on aspects that are not of interest and has shortcomings in knowledge of the disciplines to be taught.

Finally, this first part of the book calls for the school system to be rebuilt, taking the past as a starting point and emphasising the importance of old and classical school books as key pillars of current edu-

cation, given that teaching is something timeless dedicated to transmitting established and perennial knowledge.

In the second part, Laforgue, as a scientist and researcher, emphasises the value of science and knowledge. He sets out the fundamental purpose of research, which is based on the social value of teaching, learning, and knowledge, as well as the desire for truth. This truth considers a fundamental knowledge that is in a deep crisis owing to the excessive division of the disciplines by universities, which have segregated areas of knowledge, hierarchising them and disconnecting them from one other.

The author argues, from a Christian perspective, that the foundation of the university is the study of all things as everything is God's creation and so is worth studying. From this theological perspective, knowledge is limitless and this is the foundation of the structure of the university and research. Based on this idea, he conceives academic life as being subject to its relationship with theology and affirms that it is in the university where a link is created by the shared passion for truth, which, in line with Edith Stein's ideas, is defined as something that is simultaneously aesthetic and factual.

Following this line of argument, the author defends the spiritual training, similar to Christian spirituality, that derives from study, using the example of his own discipline of mathematics to illustrate it. Sadly, the search for objectification has meant

that what cannot be defined has been forgotten, eliminating the essence and spirit of things and preventing people from attaining knowledge in its fullness. This has reduced science to learning mechanical procedures. Consequently, the author proposes re-establishing an equilibrium between science and the spirit, explaining how to achieve this at different educational levels.

As a result of this attitude towards knowledge, this mathematician argues that teachers should have a love for reading and culture. This would involve, at the same time as transmitting this love to their students, as well as promoting the use of language that is appropriate and distinguishes them, experiencing and transmitting the freedom of thought that reading provides, combatting the threats television has created, reconciling culture with science, and transmitting the cultural legacy.

Finally, in the last part of the book, the author defines mathematics using the concepts of understanding and resolving and identifies this discipline as a language that is transmitted from generation to generation. On the basis of this, he argues that mathematics should be one of the main objects of transmission and that its teaching should focus on essential things. Regarding this discipline, Lauforgue argues that it has an essential relationship with human beings as it gives them a common object of interest, an experience of suffering, and a constant search to make reality objective. Owing to this human nature, mathematics contains something that is

invisible, the facts of thought, both to the eyes and to thought.

In essence, in this book the author opens numerous areas for reflection on the current state of schools and pedagogical knowledge, offering interesting arguments justified using anecdotal accounts. Nonetheless, some cases clearly lack the scientific basis that would be necessary to support more solidly the arguments proposed. This is an interesting and stimulating work, for those who share the author's viewpoint and those who reject it alike, as it challenges the current beliefs of the educational system and can also reposition some current educational practices.

Beatriz Gálvez ■

**Ferraces-Otero, M. J., Godás-Otero, A., & García-Álvarez, J. (2019).**

*Cómo realizar un estudio científico en ciencias sociales, de la educación y de la salud* [How to do a scientific study in the social, educational, and health sciences]. Madrid: Dykinson, S.L. 164 pp.

It is now over twenty years since, in 1999, the European Higher Education Area's (EHEA) proposals to completely modify Europe's system at this educational level of in the renowned Bologna declaration. It took slightly over half of this time for Spanish universities to embrace the new regulations, which became official with the publication of Royal Decree 1393/2007 (2007). As a result, the structure of official university education in Spain changed.



Although the measures implemented under the framework of the well-known Bologna process have been contentious, they are deeply embedded. One of this educational reform's most controversial innovations was the requirement for students to complete or, rather submit, a Final Year Project (FYP) or Final Master's Project (FMP) to obtain their new qualifications. These consists of research projects relating to the content students have studied in which they must demonstrate maturity in the development of the aptitudes and competences they have, at least in principle, been learning. Working on these projects should allow students to experience scientific and academic research at a basic level. Seen in this way, it should not be stressful but rather enriching. However, at the end of every year, thousands of students hoping to graduate tremble before the initials FYP and FMP. Why is this so if they have been taught how to do it? This is the crux of the matter: in most cases, they have not been given sufficient knowledge to do it.

Ferraces-Otero, Godás-Otero, and García-Álvarez are no strangers to this problem. During undergraduate studies, and often at master's level, students hardly become acquainted with scientific research; this happens most significantly in the fields of educational, social, and health sciences. Students often feel insecure and nervous when faced with a task they do not know how to tackle. But the most serious consequence of this lack of training is undoubtedly that students produce low quality work. Motivated by the need to correct this situation, Ferra-

ces-Otero, Godás-Otero, and García-Álvarez present *Cómo realizar un estudio científico en ciencias sociales, de la educación y de la salud* (2019), a concise book that introduces the scientific method to students of these branches of knowledge, who are often not taught how to practise science.

The main aim of this book is to help with university students' learning and research development as much as possible so they can complete their FYPs, FMPs, or doctoral theses. More specifically, it sets out to illustrate clearly and simply the different types of experimental and quasi-experimental designs that can be used.

All of this is framed within the requirements of university learning and the needs of students at this stage in this process. The book is, therefore, a useful tool that sets out to answer new researchers' main questions about the most used designs when doing scientific studies.

Over five chapters, the authors skilfully illustrate and provide examples for each of the experimental and quasi-experimental designs selected for this work in order to facilitate students' comprehension of difficult content and ensure that they carry out systematic and controlled research. To do this, they make very good use of tables, graphs, figures, and diagrams. Furthermore, the clear and concise introduction anticipates one of the book's greatest achievements: its eminently practical character. This character, evidence of the authors' deep pedagogical knowledge, is apparent from the first page to the last.

While the book specifically focuses on data analysis, especially in the experimental strategy of quantitative designs, the first chapter offers a general overview of research in the social, educational, and health sciences. Acting as an introduction, this first chapter familiarises the reader with the concept of science and the scientific method. Always offering the right amount of information to avoid confusing the reader, the authors explain the features of the scientific method and the steps it includes, at the same time as mentioning some basic research methods and techniques. The example of the structure of a research paper that concludes this first part is especially important, as there is no point in planning and carrying out a research project if we do not then know how to communicate the results.

This opening chapter also functions as an introduction to and link between all of the others, as readers can return to it to interpret what they read further on. Chapters two, three, four, and five in turn, despite covering different types of experimental or quasi-experimental research design (chapters two and three describe between-group single-factor and multi-factor designs, while four and five cover within-group designs), are structured in the same way. Each chapter is planned so that the new researchers participate in their learning through practice and includes examples of various research scenarios from a variety of topics, which are always appropriate for the students on the courses the book addresses. Each one features a description of a case study from formulating the problem up to interpret-

ing the results. In the following case studies, the authors leave space so that after a statement is made, the reader can complete each of the following steps in a piece of research. Each chapter also includes a model research paper, to illustrate clearly how each of the steps followed during the research should be presented.

In summary, *Cómo realizar un estudio científico en ciencias sociales, de la educación y de la salud* is a helpful guide on how to approach research design in order to write quality academic works in higher education. Its interactive character provides very useful practical experience so that undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students can learn how to do experimental and quasi-experimental designs and share the results of their research.

This work is an important contribution to the field of university research as it is a tool that will not only improve its readers' knowledge of research, but also enable them to contribute to the production of quality academic work. Accordingly, it is worth drawing attention to the authors' efforts to take topics that, like some parts of research design such as data analysis, can be dry and complex and make them interesting. The detailed examples of how to write up correctly the information obtained in this step are one of the most notable aspects in this regard.

As a result, new researchers in the university setting are fortunate as reading this excellent book will provide answers to many of the questions they are likely to have while carrying out their

first research projects. Finally, we should not lose sight of the importance of encouraging people to take pleasure in the world of science and all of the activities it encompasses. The authors of this work can undoubtedly be sure that they will encourage many students to plunge into this world.

Carolina Rodríguez-Llorente ■

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