

Book reviews

Escámez-Sánchez, J., & Peris-Cancio J.-A. (2021).

La universidad del siglo xxi y la sostenibilidad social [The 21st century university and social sustainability].

Tirant Humanidades. 281 pp.

This book represents a firm commitment to the vigorous and potential ethical engagement that should be driven by the university in response to the unstoppable process of degradation of the Earth and the life that inhabits it. For several decades now, considerable scientific evidence has shown that the future of our planet is in serious danger: the threat of destroying biodiversity and the risk of being destroyed.

Not surprisingly, there is an uneasy sense of discomfort, and public opinion polls quite often remind us of the fact that environmental deterioration is one of the most urgent concerns of the global population in this century. Meanwhile, as an institution that promotes a better future, the university cannot stand by and do

nothing, allowing the matter to progress along such a dangerous path.

The contributions contained in this book are inevitably the result of a humanistic vision inspired by a different paradigm for the relationship between human beings and nature, which entails a way of civilisation that is more loving, respectful and fraternal to Mother Earth. Inspired by Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, this book emphasises a preoccupation with caring for our shared home, deemed to be a mother and sister, with which we share our existence; it is a mistreated home that is demanding greater attention, along with all those who are excluded and rejected in this world.

From this perspective, the book focuses on three basic, but intimately related, scenarios: the conservation of natural resources to ensure life, the decent development of nations and the profound social inequality gap.

Given that we are not facing two problems, one human and the other natural

resource abuse, but rather one single human-environmental problem, the authors of this book are aware that a profound change is needed in our minds and hearts, because ensuring a sustainable lifestyle is only possible within the framework of a new sense of inter-dependence and global responsibility.

In light of the overriding need for general sustainability that will ensure a social agreement between humans and nature, and because the issue is so serious that it has become a matter of life or death for both parties, this work turns to normative ethics as a general criterion for determining when an action is correct and when it is not in response to the cries of the Earth and of the impoverished in today's context of uncertainty, diversity and inequality.

Thus, with the intention of driving real change at this decisive moment in our most recent history, the book's authors expound on certain crucial topics. One such topic is as follows: What is the mission of the university in this century and in relation to the environment? (chap. 1). Prof. Escámez, in a fruitful dialogue with the writings of Ortega y Gasset, argues that the most pressing mission of the university is to educate individuals in "lively ideas", that is, "the repertoire of convictions about what the world and fellow man is" (p. 22), including an assessment of what is more or less worthy. In sum, to train professionals to judge the culture of their moment in history and to decide whether they respond to its vital needs. It is also important to teach a type of normative ethics (deontological, consequentialist

or utilitarian) that promotes the common good so as to fulfil their role as citizens. This chapter ends by establishing new lines of research on the university's mission in this century.

Closely linked to this chapter, prof. Peris-Cancio discusses the commitment that the University must make with respect to social sustainability (chap. 2). Academicism or an openness to personal development? This is one — perhaps the most endemic — dilemma that persists at this honourable institution. In these pages, a critique is made of the excessive self-absorption of the university, which must accept the challenge of abandoning academicism that breeds resistance to change, and the impossible task of training competent professionals who are abreast of the times. Instead, the proposal here is that the university needs to determine the values, attitudes and knowledge that university students must possess in order to develop adequately as professionals, as well as the promotion of students that are "active, with critical thinking skills, involved in social transformation" (p. 56). A call is made to the moral rearmament of the university toward social sustainability geared toward the common good of everyone that inhabits this planet.

Chapter 4 is devoted to human rights and social inclusion. According to the authors, the university is an ideal setting in which to put forth arguments to resolve unjust situations and to promote a more attentive way of viewing others, focused not only on oneself but also endeavouring to nurture lives prone to precariousness

and rejection. In this regard, the university could be a space for rational deliberation with a view to treating others with benevolence and care.

Expanding on the previous section, Chapter 5 focuses on postulating that the university must contribute to the formation of citizens for robustly democratic societies. If human rights are inalienable universal safeguards for all people, then the democratic space is the ideal setting in which to debate and become committed to promoting and achieving fundamental rights for humans. Therefore, the concepts of participation, citizenship and civil society are analysed here with a view to understanding the need to weave social networks that act as a buffer to aggression and manipulation of economic and political power. Teaching how to condemn injustice and promote the pursuit of fundamental rights is one of the educational aims for which university students learn and exercise active citizenship.

The list of chapters devoted to key issues about the university's mission ends in Chapter 9. Here, the topic addressed is whether university education should be dedicated to cultivating "the values of its political community" or, instead, should convey "the values of the human community" (p. 221). The very title of this chapter hints that the authors are more inclined to educating cosmopolitan citizens. They put forward reasons to support the idea that, as a result of the recent pandemic, we are citizens of one large human community. Without surrendering our local identity, it is necessary for them to learn to "recog-

nise humanity wherever they find it; [...] and to be willing to comprehend humanity, no matter how strangely it is disguised" (p. 228). They conclude with the idea of promoting politics and education aimed at "safeguarding human unity and diversity: the treasure of human unity is human diversity; the treasure of human diversity is human unity" (p. 242).

The remaining chapters focus on current issues directly involved in achieving balanced sustainability. Chapter 3 addresses the issue of inequality as the root of unsustainability, running the risk of destroying ways of human life and life on the planet itself. The university institution should promote critical citizenship that leads to human development, reducing inequalities and constructing a more just world.

In turn, Chapter 6 analyses the problem of poverty from the approach of human capacities (M. Nussbaum). This approach "not only prepares for life but also for work" (p. 159), thus rendering capacity development one of the main objectives that should be sought by the university at this time. Furthermore, this approach would help to reduce or even eradicate poverty, given that developing capacities is like equipping a person with all the resources needed to live a decent life in conditions of equality and respect.

The following chapter is devoted to analysing the phenomenon of migration. Beyond socio-political implications and data, the focus is on value judgements of this phenomenon, resulting in a proposal of ed-

educational lines of action at the university, opting for inter-culturalism, cultivating rights from a universal ethics stance that recognises the values of equality, equity, environmental conservation, educating university students in dialogue for multi-cultural co-existence, the moral responsibility to reject all forms of exclusion (social, economic, cultural, gender-based, etc.) and the creation of respectful relationships with the natural and urban setting (p. 188).

The final topic addressed in Chapter 8 is gender equality in relation to sustainability and human dignity. One striking feature of this chapter is the interesting way of handling this social problem, which is generating no small amount of violence and inequality; these issues should be addressed at the university in order to generate sustainable human development. A set of guidelines is described to make it possible to progress appropriately in this matter as part of university education.

The book ends by giving a summary of an empirical research project that describes the reality of one sector of the university student body. The results of this study are highly interesting. Notably, these university students can be seen as having basic knowledge about sustainability, claim to have high regard for ethical values and accept those norms that correspond to the desired sustainability; however, imbalances are detected in their attitudes and skills, which is linked to a widespread sense of indifference for sustainability or for participating in activities committed to promoting the environment.

Overall, without wishing to stem the great flow of ideas and educational lines of action that appear in these pages, I encourage you, dear reader, to take a closer look inside this book because the authors have managed to create a brilliant pedagogical text about one of the most pressing issues of this century.

It might have been enriching to take this editorial opportunity to start an exciting debate with other ethical and pedagogical views that are removed from the decidedly idealistic tone found in normative ethics and its related pedagogy. Perhaps this could spark a new challenge.

Ramón Mínguez-Vallejos ■

Grupo SI(e)TE Educación (2021).

La calidad en la educación

[*Quality in education*].

Horsori. 166 pp.

In this era of standardisation and improvement in all areas of personal and collective life, it is especially necessary to discuss the topic of quality in relation to education, just like quality is demanded in the fields of health, food, communication, transportation, etc. This is even more important, if possible, when it comes to education, given that the aim is to optimise the possibilities of human development and communal living. Therefore, we are pleased to welcome a work that seriously addresses the topic of quality and offers specific proposals to education professionals. In this book, each chapter is penned by a different author, analysing

important aspects of the complex structure that is quality education.

The first, signed by Professor Antonio Colom, provides a historical overview of the main authors and ideas that have undoubtedly influenced today's conception of quality education, noting how concepts that have actually been in use for a long time often seem to be revived as if they were novelties. For example, within the New School movement, the methodological proposal by Montessori, which arose in the slums of San Lorenzo (Rome), is now "the latest pedagogical trend in the most exclusive settings of Manhattan or California", among other places. At the end of his text, Professor Colom perceptively notes that today "Pedagogy seems to be devoid of its own model of educational quality". Without falling into useless pessimism — because the scholarly institutions of our time do indeed fulfil their purpose and, "they apparently don't do such a bad job" — it is also true that "the *commercialisation of knowledge* cannot be considered educational quality, despite what international organisations would have us think, given that a quality educational system should not focus exclusively on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), as certain generations of technocrats seem to be demanding [...]. And the reason for this is quite simply that their fundamental commitment should continue to be educating with a focus on values and the moral development of people.

The second chapter, by Professor Gonzalo Vázquez, focuses on the concept of deep learning, which includes distinguish-

ing between action and activity, noting that the former is of a prior, more profound, nature because it exceeds mere activism in learning, for example. Thus, *deep learning*, defined as "authentic learning of higher-order cognitive processes", can be achieved. It also enables the learner to think for him- or herself and to gradually obtain wisdom, which goes beyond mere knowledge to become the "most elaborate fruit of education". The chapter goes on to discuss numerous other highly topical issues: the role of technology, the selection of valuable learning, the evaluation of learning from a competency perspective, etc., revealing the complexity of these times and the need to reflect on the fundamental issues of so-called quality education.

Chapter three of this book brings back an old topic of debate and updates it: the role of learning objectives in a quality educational process. With remarkable clarity, Professor Sarramona outlines the background of the debate about behavioural objectives, going so far as to precisely detail the current conception of competency objectives as the integrating feature of the trio composed of knowledge, skills and attitudes. This chapter also sheds light on a fundamental topic: justification of the proposed objectives, which is sought in more personal needs as well as in social needs. The chapter offers detailed theoretical reflections as well as practical guidance, following this author's sensible custom.

In turn, the fourth chapter, by Professor Petra María Pérez, focuses on an aspect that is no less relevant in quality education: the "comprehensive well-being of the stu-

dents”, which is a key matter both for their own good and for their academic success. Her contribution mainly relies on data arising from analyses of the PISA tests. However, other equally important issues arise from the criteria argued by this author and others about the positive effects of student participation seen at diverse levels of the educational institution, given that institutionalised education aims to prepare students to actively participate in democratic, and therefore participative, society.

In his chapter, Professor Touriñán discusses the need to distinguish the concept of quality of education from other similar concepts, such as quality in education, emphasising the expert status to be given to education professionals, who are clearly involved in the educational processes, and this involvement represents an activity that is shared with the learner. The chapter outlines numerous pedagogical criteria put forward by the author in other publications, as can be seen in the bibliographical references, which converge in this text about the concept of quality.

Chapter six focuses on quality in relation to university institutions. Here, Professor Alfredo Jiménez starts with the legislative framework from the 1990s and continues to provide a detailed account up to the present time with a view to revealing initiatives and ways of putting into practice very specific proposals for improving quality at university level, focusing on the European framework that Spain is part of. In this regard, special emphasis is placed on the evaluation system in our universities, detailing regulations and

aspects that are linked to this evaluation. On the whole, the author recognises that there are benefits to accreditation processes for university institutions but he warns that certain critical aspects have not yet been considered, particularly as regards teaching activities themselves, both inside and out of the classroom.

The high point of the book is found in the appendix that Professor T. R. Neira devotes to José Gaos. The text was originally presented at a conference given at the Ateneo de Gijón in early November 2020, the last academic act performed by the author before he died. The author was quite familiar with Gaos and, on this occasion, focused his attention on the concept of individuality as the basis for presenting his own views in this regard. The text is an example of Professor T. R. Neira’s unique way of expressing himself, always using quotes from relevant contemporary authors on the subject matter at hand for support, while at the same time presenting his own views clearly and in a bold manner. Here, the topic that he touched on the most was the reaffirmation of the substantially individual dimension of the person, which we know was one of his primary concerns in recent years. This text affords added value to the book by contributing one last demonstration of the strong analytical capacity and worth of Professor Teófilo Rodríguez Neira, who will always be remembered.

Besides the contents mentioned above, the book also contains an introduction expressing the authors’ desire to pay tribute to Dr. Teófilo Rodríguez Neira, who sad-

ly died from COVID in November 2020 and was an active member of the SI(e) TE academic group, which is composed of highly reputable professors of Spanish universities working in the field of Theory and History of Education, most of them having earned emeritus status for their age, even though they have all made numerous significant contributions to Pedagogy today. The preface offers a perfect description of the group's motivations and characteristics, in addition to showing heartfelt appreciation for the fondly remembered Professor Teófilo, as everyone affectionately called him.

José Antonio Jordán ■

Santos-Rego, M.A, Lorenzo, M., & Mella, I. (2020).

El aprendizaje-servicio y la educación universitaria. Hacer personas competentes [Service-learning and university education. Making competent people]. Octaedro. 193 pp.

Research and literature about service learning have increased in recent years, experiencing exponential growth in this decade. The vast majority of publications emphasise the potential that this experiential methodology has for the participants to learn, as well as the social impact deriving from the related projects. But we must not forget that this is a didactic methodology with a clear pedagogical objective. We stress this point because many of the practices labelled as SL seem to resemble volunteering projects or field practices instead. Therefore, those of us

in the pedagogy field must ensure that certain epistemological criteria are met so as to guarantee the quality of the initiatives; otherwise, there is a risk of trivialising this method, as is the case when any group project is prone to be called cooperative learning.

SL seems to have taken hold particularly at university level. Thus, in recent years, numerous research projects, scientific events, publications... and of course experiences have come to light involving a range of fields of knowledge. There are even specific networks for teachers and researchers in the field of higher education. The danger in all this is when SL shifts from being a useful methodology within the framework of competencies to being implemented as a sort of fad playing to interests that are unrelated to the teaching-learning process. Therefore, we must continue emphasising a gradual consolidation while also ensuring sufficient guarantees of pedagogical efficiency and efficacy.

In this regard, professors Miguel Ángel Santos Rego, Mar Lorenzo Moledo and Igor Mella Núñez have presented a work that progresses in the knowledge of service learning while maintaining a perspective that is, at once, critical and proactive. This can be seen in the title of the book itself.

A browse through the chapters of this book takes us from general to more specific aspects, starting with a conceptualisation of learning in higher education in the 21st century and ending with a proposal for the institutionalisation of service learning.

For its readers, the journey on this ocean of knowledge that is SL begins on an island shared by many areas. Thus, it touches down, first of all, on the epistemological foundations on which today's European Higher Education model is built, based on the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Obviously, given the contextualisation of the book, it also discusses the Spanish university system, which has faced this challenge in the midst of social change. Subsequently, the authors address the concept of educational innovation, which, in today's scenario, revolves around competency-based learning. In this latter aspect, the authors' work around understanding this new approach is particularly striking, as is their way of explaining to the uninitiated a world that is sometimes hard to comprehend from the perspective of pedagogical atheism.

At the second port on this academic voyage, the authors outline the methodology that is the focus of the book: service learning. Thus, they emphatically set out the conceptual frameworks of this type of programme, in turn distinguishing it from other educational proposals. In addition, given that SL is by no means a new concept, the work discusses the origin, evolution and adaptation of this methodology with a narration that starts with the pragmatism of the Chicago School, led by John Dewey.

The journey continues, its third stop taking the reader to a specific space in which service learning is applied. The university setting is one of the areas in which this methodology is being implemented

most widely, as shown by numerous publications, meetings, training events, and more, on the topic. Therefore, the authors have devoted a specific chapter to this aspect. This work offers us an in-depth understanding of the criteria to be used in designing, implementing and evaluating service-learning projects in higher education, affording the certainty that we are doing so with the required pedagogical rigour. To achieve this goal, reflection is proposed as a basic feature of this kind of initiative, thus tying the service performed to the academic content of the different subjects. This section ends by linking the aforementioned competency-based learning approach to service learning, highlighting the potential that this experiential methodology has in fostering the achievement of competencies through a more dynamic, contextualised process. Another relevant matter is the endorsement of SL as a proposal that aids in the insertion of university students in social and work life, given that it connects them to their surroundings and to networks of contacts that place them directly in the job market.

The final stop on this journey, in the fourth chapter of the book, is devoted to the process of institutionalising service learning in Higher Education, identifying the stakeholders, models of action and levels of achievement. In this regard, the process implemented at the University of Santiago de Compostela is taken as a starting point and reference; two research projects were conducted there within the framework of the Esculca Group, thus fostering the effective consolidation of

the method at this institution. The authors therefore advocate the evaluation of SL projects as a basic requirement for displaying their quality patterns and enabling these patterns to be presented as best practices in higher education. At this point in their voyage, readers will also learn about 19 different projects that can illustrate how to create new proposals in other lands and destinations.

We would also like to point out the attached survey contained in the book (“CU-COCSA – Cuestionario sobre competencias cívico-sociales y autoeficacia del alumnado universitario”, the survey on civic and social competencies and self-efficacy of university students), which is placed at the disposal of the scientific community in an exercise of academic solidarity and knowledge transfer. This instrument contains four scales that refer to matters related to university education, social participation, civic and social competencies and self-efficacy. Therefore, it is a validated benchmark for evaluating projects of this nature.

In sum, with this work, the authors combine experience and sound research in order to create an irrefutable line of reasoning with regard to the academic and social potential of service learning. Thus, they have presented a book that must be consulted by anyone in the academic community wishing to learn more about SL, moving beyond a simplified discourse in which the weight of the argument falls merely on rhetoric without being grounded in the pedagogical knowledge that has brought service learning to where it is today. It should also be noted that this

book is useful in teaching university students, offering them options to help them optimise their academic journey based on experiences of this nature, which afford pragmatic nuances to cold curricula. Therefore, this work may be of interest to a wide-ranging audience, from students and/or novice researchers to teachers and others with academic management responsibilities, or even professionals working at tertiary sector organisations. In this way, the book represents a step forward in the service-learning methodology, and could even become a benchmark in this field, although one thing clearly distinguishes it from other discourses: this work is rooted in the pedagogical rigour of the arguments expounded by its authors.

Alexandre Sotelino Losada ■

