

## **Are Humans Failing?: Philosophical Equivoques of Academia and the Role of Assessment and Creativity**

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### **Abstract**

Paulo Freire, James Dewey and Agostinho da Silva are unanimous in arguing that teaching and learning are being perverted by institutional partisan bias, which misunderstand the philosophical backbone of the whole educational project. Education has to contribute to the happiness of humankind, as was voiced by the Enlightenment movement and written in the Preamble of the Pittsburgh Declaration of Independence of 1776, in the now called United States of North America. Today's Assessment of educational results, refers to three spheres of action: students, professionals, and policy. (i) Student's Learning Assessment, e.g., the PISA Report; Erasmus experience (ESCE-IPS 1990'); Blended Learning and Hybrid education (TGI ESTS-IPS, 1990'); Technical Writers intensive courses (APCOMTEC, 2009); MOOCs (IPS, 2000'); Maker Spaces (Maquijig, 2000'). (ii) Academia and Staff Assessment, e.g. Professional Development Plan; Curriculum and Materials Development. (iii) Educational Policy Assessment, e.g. the social impact of public policy. No matter the area of educational intervention, the same reasoning is applied. Educational ecosystems are politically programmed to manage and control, that is, to regulate and condition creativity. However, a society that does not promote and nurture creativity, and, worse, a society that actively punishes and rejects creativity, is bound to fail. No scientific or technical development may exist, persist or be maintained, i.e. survive, without active and pro-active public and private interventions on both sides of the teaching-learning duo. If and when education fails, everything else is bound to fail, because education represents the backbone of science and technology, which is the fundamental institutional structure of present contemporary societies. The purpose of the present text, with its hindsight and call for explorative and open debate, is to offer a theoretical and practical reflection on the urgent and mandatory change in educational policy worldwide, locally and globally. Creativity needs to be reinvented. And, more importantly, this reinvention process has to be assessed in an effective and consequential manner.

### **Introduction**

Both assessment and creativity play a critical role in education. Unfortunately, often these two dimensions of educational settings are inversely related. The reason for this paradox is that if assessment follows a bureaucratic and industrial based technical scope, which serves the interests of an educational system programmed to regulate and control, then creativity is bound to be sacrificed for the sake of a rule-based approach. However, the long term price for this command and control approach to education is that societies become stale, idle and obsolete, which, in turn, will force

further change. This simplified vision helps to offer a caricature of the full potential of education, in terms of its capacity to forge and to make real new forms of social organisation of human societies, and, at the same time, the risk that such a powerful instrument for societal change may be adulterated, perverted and manipulated, for the interests of a few and at the expense of the many.

One of the most effective ways to enable the creation of a trustworthy and open environment to support innovative discussion on educational settings is through curricula driven and supported visualisation graphs and schemes (e.g., Duarte et al 2021a). These create the opportunity to identify both key links among core areas and concepts, as well as the identification of themes and contents that need to be brought closer to the centre of attention of the educational programme (Duarte et al 2021b).

### **Political and Economic Tensions**

Language use supports social practices that, in turn, sustain, determine and condition legal, economic and political systems of legitimisation, of credibility and of integrity. More importantly, civilisational pressures create dominant thinking regimes that, literally, make visible what supports its trustworthiness and, simultaneously, it veils, hides and turns invisible that which reveals its insufficiency, its frailty, and its vulnerability.

Empires, dictatorships and dominant paradigms work through exclusiveness criteria, whereas whoever may contest, doubt or raise questions is interpreted and classified as an enemy, an enemy of common good, of the best interests of nations, and of the most sacred values that may be imagined, considered and taken into account. Political and economic opportunities and threats of whatever scientific area are related to the power of its scientific community and the effectiveness of its value chain and of its supply chain to deliver what they promise.

Science, technology and knowledge are examples of universal, social and cultural achievements whose benefits have to demonstrate its validity. The self-validation of science is based on its universality as there is no science that is regional, national, neither the property of a family or of a social group. More importantly, science is an open and dynamic work in progress that is fuelled by scientific criticism, by inquiry and questioning, and by the practice of free thought. Consequently, each knowledge area must acknowledge the contribution of every stakeholder and actively and proactively seek to promote its plurality, inclusivity and benefit to humanity and to scientific advancement.

This said, the point that the present text makes is that it is irrelevant the knowledge area being considered, as the same principle applies. Scientific projects, endeavours and co-creations are self-explanatory and their benefits are self-evident, as this is itself a precondition for its scientific foundation. Opinion-makers are not (necessarily) scientists; opinion-makers have to rely upon the universal values and principles of science in order to ground their reasoning upon general, plural and inclusive models of rationality.

Knowledge areas related to the humanities, history, philosophy, science of religions, arts, sport, - or to the study of myths and of laic spirituality, - or to the power of images, of texts and of sound to communicate, within and across species, regimes and

scales -, are examples of manifestation and of participation in the collective rationale of meaning-making that constitutes the backbone of science. More importantly, language, its use and the dynamic social changes it embodies and is embedded in, constitutes a privileged laboratory for the study of human thought and action, whatever the space and time setting and background being considered.

The resilience, endurance and charisma of scholars who have fought for educational paradigms that indeed serve the long term interests of humanity has been of longstanding influence. Agostinho da Silva was an active philologist and a militant humanist (Pinho, 2021); Paulo Freire has created a powerful democratic educational paradigm and theoretical critical model (Collins, 1977); and James Dewey has had an important role in the educational reform movement (Dewey et al, 1939).

## **Educational Settings**

Education is important. Yet the importance of education is directly proportional to the degree through which its effectiveness and efficiency are evaluated, the criteria being used and the ends it serves. According to Kurt Lewis, there is nothing more practical than a good theory. Theories, abstract models and intellectual reasoning are the building blocks of educational contents.

Acknowledging the challenges and opportunities of present-day education, the central argument is that each historical era, each new generation and each academic school of thought, in science, technology, religion or the arts, is formatted, moulded and determined by a certain number of characteristics that constitute its existential identity and its capacity to differentiate itself from the rest, in the form of a model of rationality. That is, rationality, or, better, rationalities, in the plural form, refer to human's capacity to make sense of reality and to offer arguments, hypothesis, assumptions, and principles that enable the description of action and thought patterns, configurations, priorities, flows and processes.

The history of humankind may be described by the successive perspectives, world-views and Cosmo visions that frame and condition present thought and action. In other words, what humans can process and shape through thought and action takes into account the plurality, diversity and alterity of thought and action both from contemporary fellow beings and from past generations. Culture is the channel, instrument and vehicle of transmission of those diverse and diversifying life experiences. Moreover, culture is the process, the ability and the possibility of overcoming ambiguities, conflicts and paradoxes. Diving into the meaning of culture it is possible to argue that culture, as a process, is a model of rationality, that is, it becomes a frame, a lens and a mould that shapes reality.

Dominant thinking is characterised by mainstream, orthodox, hegemonic and centripetal forms of organising knowledge and information. Contrarily, non-dominant thinking is fragmented, peripheral, heterodox, plural and diverse. What is today considered to be dominant was once revolutionary and innovative; the periphery becomes the new centre and new peripheries emerge. The issue is that it is important to map, to position, to locate and to identify different systems of thought and to acknowledge how, when and where they are gaining or losing power, relevance and charisma. However, according to the proposal of the present paper, the critical issue is

not so much to locate the winners and losers of the most popular thought systems' competition, in any given time, but, rather, to acknowledge how, continuously, present day models of rationality are being shaped by the arguments, principles and motivations of both the large and most representative and the small and least popular reasoning systems. In other words, reality is being shaped by ideas, which frame thought and action, through the use of language and the participation in social practices.

One of the most fascinating aspects of contemporary societies is the blurring of disciplinary borders. The rationale behind the "learning to learn" motto in education is related to the fast-paced growth of contents and the need to accommodate rapidly changing needs and professional based requirements. Learning how to learn, therefore, refers to the need to simultaneously master ever increasing levels of information and to keep up the spirits, the self-motivation and the gratification side of self-discovery. Contemporary societies have broadened the spectrum between what it means to be connected, to have access to broad level information and to be regularly exposed to globalised cultures and the opposite, to be excluded, ignored and neglected by the digital, planetary mass media and social media networks.

### **Opportunities and Threats of EAP/ESP**

Taking into account contemporary societies' contexts - and their complexity - forces a double mirror movement in the sense that both society and the lenses used to interpret it are mutually dependent and continuously influencing, conditioning and determining their simultaneous course of action. This said, certain areas offer unique insights through the evidence based immediacy of their successes and failures. Successes in terms of enabling the lessons learnt to be disseminated, applied and further developed in other contexts of application; and failures when their privileges and the benefits they created are concentrated in the hands of a few and at the expense of the many.

The development of the scientific and disciplinary areas of English for Academic Purposes and of English for Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP) has had an exponential growth in recent decades, which has followed a three centuries old inheritance of the Enlightenment movement and the apparent superiority of European Cosmogonies, embodied in the persona of the educated and white individual male.

Three main factors have contributed to this growth, related to worldwide recent developments of EAP/ESP scientific production: (i) the globalisation of markets and the raise in international trade pressures; (ii) the hegemonic use of the English language at international scientific and academic levels; and (iii) the political and industrial interests of over-developed and rich countries, who share supposedly democratic and market-based economies.

Beyond these trends, there are long term pressures that affect the evolution of regional and national economies, which may fall under the categories of technology, of integrated eco-systems, and, at a symbolic level, of collective imaginary, archetypes and Cosmo visions. The argument is that the digitalisation of procedures, of communication networks, and of internal and external organisational processes, has been led by the powerful increase in technological capacity of English-speaking economies. Moreover, the English language has been able to extend its influence

together with the expansion of the general use of technology, in industry, trade, the academia, the social media, in science and in education, inclusively in countries where it is not a native language, working as an international lingua franca.

Taking into account the reality of EAP/ESP scientific production - and the mutual influential spheres of action, of global trade, of English use in science, and of the interests of traditionally powerful industrialised and service-based economies -, it is possible to propose three working hypotheses to be explored.

Firstly, the self-organisation, autopoietic and autonomous efficiency and effectiveness of the use of English – of EAP/ESP - may be taken and studied as a working model for other language groups to follow. These may include Asian and African language groups, as well as other European languages. In particular, it should consider the languages falling under two extremes; that is, both the most spoken and disseminated, as well as the minority languages that may carry with them unique social, knowledge-intensive and symbolically rich traditions, including original people's, indigenous languages and also regional languages, from the different continents.

Secondly, in terms of business models and of business strategies, the argument is that English and its hegemonic success - in technology, industry, science and global politics - may serve as a leader and role model that other languages may follow, offering similar networks of services and creating faithful communities within their different spheres of action and of influence.

And thirdly, in political terms, the economic theory criticism and the denouncing of the growing levels of economic inequality, inter and intra-countries, voiced by the Global South and the Global North perspectives, helps to acknowledge the complexity of contemporary societies. Consequently, the argument voiced by the present text is that it is possible and, indeed, mandatory to acknowledge the effectiveness of the spreading of the EAP/ESP scientific production, and to use this scientific evidence in an inclusive, democratic, distributive, participative, collaborative and innovative way in order to promote the development of other languages, language groups and language based scientific communities.

The proposal of the present text is that such rationale could bring visible benefits and win win models that may create autopoietic and self organised individual and collective social change mechanisms. The dynamics of social change are fractal and spiral oriented, enabling collective benefits to emerge and to sustain further development, evolution and transformation.

Critical perspectives of political and ideological influences on educational systems (e.g., Sloan, 2008) have played an important role in helping to progress more democratic and inclusive approaches to education.

### **The Broad Cope of Educational and Societal Settings**

Language connects to philosophy, to literature, to myths, to religion and to Cosmogonies. Improving systems of scientific supported language use and dissemination – as EAP/ESP scientific production has presently achieved – at the service of both majority and minority languages, is a proposal worth exploring at theoretical and practical levels. Consequently, it is important to acknowledge the troubled nature of present day social, legal, political and economic collective

environments. In other words, only by facing and confronting the hard to face truths of the self destructive nature of many of the dilemmas and ambiguities of present day societies is it possible to envision, to imagine and to co-create possible solutions.

There is a long list of current problems, which may include: the ongoing war, following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February of 2022; the armament race and the continuous armed conflicts in other parts of the world, including state terrorism; the migrant crisis, the decades old refugee camps and the European fortress; the loss of the opportunity of the Arab Spring hope for democratic change, which started in Tunisia in 2011, and its links to the ongoing Mediterranean migrant crises, and labour explorations and slavery in European markets; the environmental problems related to climate change, loss of biodiversity and contamination of natural resources, which create a domino impact on energy, transport and infrastructural conditions; the rise of political extremism and the difficulty of protecting democracy and democratic institutions, locally and globally; and the loss of protection and the danger of losing and of further degradation of basic rights for underprivileged populations, with alarming rates of human rights violations related to misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and aporophobia, or fear and rejection of the poor and different.

The OECD countries - the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – constitute a forum where over three dozen national governments collaborate in order to serve their collective interests through a common voice that seeks to influence global trade and its mechanisms of regulation, control and dissemination. The rhetoric is linked to the promotion of so-called sustainable economic growth, yet this kind of discourse has been denounced as green-washing and as the “shooting the can” phenomenon, whereas distractive manoeuvres help to maintain resistance to change and to strengthen the rejection of novelty, related to whatever may cause harm to the apparently desirable present state of affairs.

Alarmingly, there is little to no discussion of above national governments international trade disputes. These have acquired a severity and magnitude that forces economic, law and management theory to react - slowly, tentatively and almost invisible to the general and non-specialised public. More importantly, these theoretical criticisms have set in motion international social movements of activists who seek to denounce the vested interests and abuse of dominant position of transnational corporations and economic groups.

In particular, the reality of Investor-State Dispute Settlement, ISDS, (Jandhyala, 2016), and the legal and political developments that different world regions have managed to set in motion, reveals an intricate system of deadlocks and blockages, which systematically favours a biased pro-capital position. Within regional and international trade areas, the protection of collective commons, of labour rights and of natural resources, has been systematically losing ground. In the book, “The Code of Capital” (Pistor, 2019), the gradual and persistent development of contractual, legal and constitutional procedural commitments, in national and international legal codes, has helped to bring legitimacy, legality and credibility to outcomes that destroy work and labour protection, consumer rights, and the safeguard of the environment and of natural resources.

The result of these developments is that the raising levels of economic inequality, the climate injustice - and the exclusion of impoverished and underprivileged populations from political, economic, cultural and social spheres of decision-making - has become a norm. In other words, this unfair and self-destructive world organisation, which risks the quality of life, the survival of the human species and the protection of life on planet Earth, is either neglected, ignored or else denied by opinion-makers and decision-makers alike. These catastrophic realities either become invisible and non-existent, or else, surprisingly, are treated as a business-as-usual affair that is already being taken care of by the fallacy of the sustainable growth discourse, and by the productivity, efficiency and effectiveness paradigms of contemporary dominant models of science and technology.

The Degrowth social movements - and the rich and diverse economic theory that supports it - have been more effective at attracting non-experts and very young participants than the academic community or the political *status quo*. The point to be made is that the economic and legal interactions that govern global trade are dedicated - in terms of a high majority of efforts - to managing and negotiating contracts and privileges and not to productive and social distributive actions. That is, present day institutions dedicate the vast majority of their time and resources to bureaucratic, procedural and contractual tasks, implying that the real cause of their existence and their social and humane mission is neglected and ignored.

Non-governmental and non-profit sectors, private and for-profit organisations, as well as governmental and administrative institutions, together share this paradoxical, alarming and ambiguous state of affairs. Whereas their true reason for existence is to support a non-changing social and political system, implies that long term survival of human organisations is at stake, at least under the present civilizational status of present times societies and economies.

To ignore and reject their collective social, cultural and political responsibility, at organisational and institutional level, implies ignoring the protection of the interests of minorities and of underprivileged populations, and neglecting the defence of nature, the protection of the commons and the promotion of inclusion and of long term social justice.

The author Yong Zhao has systematically analysed the role of international assessment of educational systems through a critique of the PISA report, which has followed partisan, biased and non-democratic intentions and practices (Zhao, 2016, 2019, 2020). The importance of scholarly work that denounces and brings evidence based arguments that help to clarify the true nature, complexity and ambiguity of educational assessment is paramount.

## **Conclusion**

The role of education in the XXI century reflects the challenges and opportunities of human societies across the globe. The inheritance from the XIX century, such as European colonial powers and the growth of mass education, together with industrialisation, have been transformed into present day deterioration of the environment, the raise of economic inequality and the use of technology in often abusive ways, for instance in the new media. The world wars of the XX century and

the Cold War, together with powerful raise of armament industry worldwide, have culminated in present times war in Ukraine, after the Invasion by Russia on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February of 2022. The Covid-19 pandemic, which has not yet been eradicated, has revealed the frailties of globalised markets and international trade agreements. Education has acquired an important position as a way to both offer careers and specialised work to national populations but also to serve as a flag for internal and external values, beliefs and political propaganda. Within this setting, the English language detains a privileged position as a lingua franca, which has enabled the development of sophisticated systems and value chains related to the production of scientific and technical knowledge, from research centres to publishing houses. Within this context, English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP) has created working models that are worth exploring as references to be eventually followed by other languages. The argument is that contemporary societies benefit from digital technology supported flows of knowledge, which enable new horizons for education and training to be expanded and explored in more democratic, inclusive and equitable ways. Regardless of the dramatic loss of human rights and of the raise of extreme right political parties, it is important to acknowledge that often this deterioration of humanity and of societal caring is paradoxically the effect of the fight for greater opportunities for all. That is, digitalisation and globalisation have disseminated consumerism and conservatism and, at the same time, it has enabled offering wider perspectives and a critical voice to the less privileged, which, in turn, has created greater resistance to change and hostility on behalf of the rich and powerful, politically and financially. The point to be made is that education is both a producer and a product of these ambiguous and conflicting tensions and the better educational research is able to acknowledge, identify and interpret the present state of affairs, the better human societies will be able to evolve, develop and transform in ways that serve the interests of both present generations and of generations to come. The role of assessment and of creativity within present and future educational settings is key.

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