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Cita:

Heras Monner Sans, Ana Inés (2014). *Emancipatory Educational Processes*. *Anthropology News*, 55 (3), 1-1.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/ana.ines.heras/36>

ARK: <https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/pomx/uB8>



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# Emancipatory Educational Processes

Ana Inés Heras

In my [February column](#) I stated that people participating in self-managed processes orient their practice by building interactional patterns that

- Support open debate and direct collaborative decision-making processes.
- Prioritize small group work and take the larger picture (the organization's) into account.
- Practice the power to transform the organization by freely interrogating the underlying logic of the process, if needed.
- And trust that what is better for the collective is what guide their project.

I described these characteristics as *challenges*: anthropologically oriented research shows that building these practices is a contested terrain because we seem to be educated in hierarchical, top-down model organizations, and thus learning how to conduct self-managed, horizontal, participatory processes is novel. From the combination of ethnography and social psychology research refers to this process as the emergency of [social economy subjectivity](#). Therefore, the challenges associated to learning how to become a member of organizations that frame their practice within *otra economía, otra sociedad* make visible that it is a learning process. It highlights that a particular orientation in education is at hand. Following several different experiences and their conceptualization in Latin America I choose to call it *emancipatory*. I will first describe some of *emancipatory education's* traits. I will then walk the readers through my own example of how this approach came into focus as an educational practice and as a topic of research. I end by stating some

questions currently being researched by anthropology-oriented studies in Latin America for which I will do a follow-up in my next column.

### *Emancipatory Education*

It can be asserted then that teaching & learning with an emancipatory perspective has a long tradition in Latin America. The specific characteristics associated to this perspective are:

- Developing people´s skills at self-managing their group life in a democratic way to become a learning community based on the practice of the *circle of learning or culture circle*.
- Facilitating collective decision-making about the educational process amongst educators, students, their families and communities, since from this perspective all participants are learners.
- Incorporating reflection on what was being learned in order to locate it in larger societal contexts (i.e., political and historical times) to foster meaningful change, oriented by justice.
- Considering that *acting, perceiving and believing* are part of the educational perspective, as well as establishing cognitive connections amongst facts and critically examining them is part of the pedagogical process.



Emancipatory Education Embodied. Image courtesy Ana Inés Heras

### *Becoming an Ethnographer Over Time*

During 1985-1991 I worked at a school run as a workers' cooperative. I also taught at after school and out-doors recreational and educational programs. I was informed by my university training, by an on-site teacher-education program at the cooperative, and by the recreational activities, that modeled after what in Latin America was called *educación popular* (the concept is difficult to translate). As teacher-workers in the cooperative, we situated our pedagogy in what is specific about *auto-gestión pedagógica* (see for example the work of Lapassade and Lobrot). We also studied approaches that questioned bureaucratic approaches to learning (e.g., Ivan Illich's). We practiced what came to be known in English as Liberatory Education (e.g., Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal's *teatro del oprimido*). We also located our work in relationship to prior work by other Latin American pedagogues working around 1950-1970's (for example, Delia Etcheverry and Luis Iglesias in Argentina). Some of their key pedagogical principles referred to developing collective autonomous thinking in schools. And one of the ways they chose to do so was by insisting in keeping student and teacher diaries that were shared with all members of the class. These logs served the purpose of reflecting critically on their learning practice. Inspired in some of these frameworks' principles I developed an approach based on documenting and analyzing day-to-day practices. For example, I wrote descriptive logs to interrogate our learning practices. I documented student and teacher interaction in assemblies, paying attention to who spoke and when. I read those records out loud to the students so they could analyze them too. I became aware that the patterns of everyday school life framed learning and that it was worth interrogating them. Without calling it so, I was working under the premise of *making the familiar strange*. In this way, I learned some of the skills that later became key in my training as a collaborative sociolinguist and ethnographer.

Even though now my area of interest is not necessarily schools per se, but self-managed organizations and how learning takes place in them, in previous years I studied classroom life at public schools, both in California, USA (1991-1998) and Jujuy, Argentina (1999-2008). Throughout that work I became aware

that *emancipatory education* is held at different organizational contexts. In other words, it may be possible that emancipatory practices and frameworks are put at use in educational contexts that do not share the culture of self-managed, autonomous organizations that I described in the first paragraph of this piece. In line of these ideas there are several anthropology-oriented studies nowadays in Latin America that seek to identify responses to some of these questions:

- What educational practices can be identified as emancipatory?
- Why would they be considered emancipatory?
- In which organizational settings do they arise? (eg, public schools, workers' run cooperatives, Bachilleratos Populares, Social Movement Educational settings)
- What are the relationships between emancipatory educational processes and public policy?

In my next column I will explain some of the differences and commonalities of specific types of schools, such as the Bachilleratos Populares, Schools run as Cooperatives of Workers, *Escuelas de gestión social*, and Locally Situated Educational Experiences run by Social Movements, and research being conducted with them and on them.

To be continued...

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