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Cita:

Coudannes Aguirre, Mariela Alejandra y Lossio, Oscar José María (2017). *Memorable Teachers in Higher Education Case Studies from Argentina. International Journal of Innovation and Research in Educational Sciences, 4, 170-173.*

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/mariela.coudannes/58>

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Memorable Teachers in Higher Education Case Studies from Argentina

Mariela Coudannes and Oscar Lossio

Abstract — This article is the result of the research project ‘Case studies on teaching practices of memorable teachers which promote critical thinking in college’. First, the theories and concepts that frame the research are explained. Then three case studies are reported in different university institutions in the central region of the Argentine Republic. Generalities and specificities that emerge from the analysis are marked. The results are then systematized according to the level of complexity of the teaching actions and the abilities developed by the students thanks to the work of memorable teachers.

Keywords — Critical Thinking, Good Practices, History and Geography, Memorable Teachers

I. INTRODUCTION

The present work focuses on the study of memorable teachers of History and Geography at three universities in the central region of Argentina (Santa Fe, Córdoba and Entre Ríos). It aims to characterize their teaching practices to know what they do, how and why. Also clarify what they can contribute to the improvement of the practices of other teachers [1], [2].

The general methodology assumed by the project members is qualitative for interpretive purposes within the framework of the constructivist epistemological perspective. The research was approached from case studies, the criterion of selection is that they were reputed cases, that is to say, they had a shared assessment and social recognition in the selected discipline.

II. WHAT ARE THE MEMORABLE TEACHERS AND HOW ARE THEIR PRACTICES?

The body of national and international work oriented to the search and understanding of good teaching practices have been developed by specialists who come mainly from the educational sciences and have asked: what are memorable teachers?, what aspects of their practices lead to being seen in this way by students? However, in general, they have not focused on specific sciences.

The main reference is Ken Bain, the director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching at New York University. His book *What the Best University Teachers Do* (2007) shows results from the research he developed over more than fifteen years on a hundred professors at different universities in the United States. In this way he managed to characterize the practices of which, for various reasons, were recognized as ‘extraordinary teachers’ by his students: the solvent management of their field of knowledge but also of others; the intellectual and emotional effort they put in their classes; reasonable demands; trust and respect; the creation of a favorable

climate for learning; the use of fair evaluation criteria, constant encouragement and the final satisfaction of students with their teaching [3].

In Argentina it’s imperative to name researchers from the National University of Mar del Plata who are members of the GIEEC (Research Group on Education and Cultural Studies). This team develops the biographical-narrative method to characterize ‘memorable teachers’ [4], those who are generators of good teaching in a moral and epistemological sense [5], not the technician who seeks efficiency. They also suggest the recovery of Fenstermacher and Soltis’ statements that characterize different teaching ‘approaches’, which they call ‘the executive’s approach’ (based on positivism and behaviorism), the therapist’s approach ‘(which seeks to affirm the student’s personality for a better learning) and the liberating’s approach ‘that combines intellectual and moral aspects, in pursuit of a development of autonomy, integrity and rationality among others virtues’ [6]. Within the latter category, the emancipatory teacher will not only promote criticism of what is established but will also encourage students to become key social actors who propose solutions.

In general terms, research suggests that ‘memorable teachers’ stand out for their intellectual passion, commitment to teaching, enthusiasm for teaching, solid academic knowledge, a willingness to learn continuously, warmth towards students and high expectations about their intellectual progress. Classrooms are a space for effective learning, where students are helped to form their own judgments and reasoning in the field, challenging them intellectually. The teachers studied reflect on the epistemology and theory of their disciplines. Their teaching styles are based on argumentation, the analysis of texts and authors, the problematization of content, the explication of one’s own posture establishing dialogues with others and the promotion of critical thinking. The latter is understood as the ability to denaturalize the obvious, to examine daily actions (as a consumer, as a citizen, in personal life, etc.), to be able to decide what to believe or what to do, and others related to specific operations: compare / contrast, classify / define, analyze / synthesize, hierarchize / sequence, relate, conceptualize, contextualize, argue, detect baseless assumptions and reflect on one’s own knowledge [7].

Other qualities highlighted by students in previous studies: ‘It explains well, demanding, patient, good person, clear, understanding..precise, respectful and fair’ [8], etc. It is also the one who does not fear the destabilizing question and the dialogue as it takes on the challenge creatively and provides more democratic conditions for learning. Without losing academic rigor, he/she accepts that students also have their knowledge, their questions and



their demands [9].

Several of these aspects emerged spontaneously in the material relayed by the case studies. In discussion groups with students the project team recorded what actually emerged from the speech of the people who participated, favoring intersubjective play and debating the main statements [10]. They were asked what aspects made their teachers memorable, what their strategies were to make them think critically and what benefits their learning had. Numerous common questions and notions emerged during the dialogue, which could easily be coded for analysis, once the recordings were transcribed.

Then follow the three cases identifying the social disciplines involved (history, geography or both).

III. FIRST CASE (HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY)

For students good practices are reflexive, epistemologically clear and motivating, in particular, those that encourage criticism through the analysis of texts. In addition, they emphasized the effectiveness of the teacher's intellectual passion to favor learning and show the relationship between theory, practice and research [11].

Another group of students emphasized the knowledge of the discipline, the invitation to think about the professional future, the generation of an atmosphere of solidarity, motivation, participation, respect for opinion and the arguments of the other. The questioning of doubts and questions was valued in a pleasant and cordial climate in which students participated in the construction of their own understanding [12].

Other essential aspects of the 'memorable' teaching of the social sciences that the teacher did were recovered: a deep reading of discourses and diverse sources to discover the underlying intentions and ideologies; the contextualization of past and present actions to achieve understanding from the point of view of the actors; the recognition of polysemy and historicity of concepts; the debate between different perspectives and positions [13]; also the knowledge of the epistemological changes of the different sciences in time [14] as an essential question in the methodological construction of the teaching.

IV. SECOND CASE (GEOGRAPHY)

The memorable teacher collaborated with critical thinking because he emphasized the place of theory as a possible reading of reality and promoted active participation to intervene in and transform it. One characteristic that the students emphasized as central was their clear epistemological position in the classroom, which implied coherence between what and how to teach. From his educational practices he showed his position and showed respect for those proposals that did not coincide with his own.

In his classes the teacher used to surprise with the use of a very rich variety of materials and activities. This is another characteristic that motivated the interest of students to continue learning.

The analysis of the stories also allowed us to recognize how the way of asking and asking questions frequently during the classes promoted greater participation and encouraged the development of the critical spirit through questions that provoked to think, 'to move'. In this way a collective construction of knowledge was achieved.

The memorable teacher, according to the interviewees, had the ability to bring the current issues to the classroom and link them to the academic contents for his problematized approach. From the selection of aspects of reality guided his work with the aim of generating debate to create in his students the ability to argue, addressing different positions and points of view in relation to the subject treated, and also generate a reflection for the intervention and transformation of reality.

The stories also show that the teacher had an extensive content management, from several fields. The interviewees defined him as an intellectual and a great reader of texts from other disciplines, very different from each other, that were in dialogue with the original one [15], [16], [17].

V. THIRD CASE (HISTORY)

According to the students, memorable teachers are not only those who 'transmit' knowledge. They are those who have a broad knowledge and a good professional practice of practice, who is conscious and consistent with their speech. According to them, it is easy to see when teachers know a lot, like their subject and form permanently: they are those that orient students towards understanding and building knowledge, helping, for example, to understand texts and prepare their classes with a diversity of resources.

Some examples of different opinions that emerged in the first discussion group: a good teacher makes the students understand and construct concepts; he/she's motivating and gives tools for the reading of texts; he/she seeks to make final exams less traumatic.

They emphasized those who make think, reflect on the contents of the subject, but also on social action. They are the ones who open the debate and do not consider it a waste of time in their class, those who avoid imposition and encourage, on the contrary, the student to elaborate his own vision and posture, and those who articulate theory with practice, texts with reality.

Students mentioned teachers who show an ethical position, those who are pluralists and form in freedom and democracy, those who accept and respect their students (not only 'tolerate' them), and with whom it is possible to talk about 'equal to equal'. Also that gives a good treatment to the students establishing a more horizontal relationship [18], [19].

VI. SYNTHESIS OF RESULTS

The following is a systematization of the coincidences obtained in the general analysis of the cases. They were ordered by levels according to the level of complexity of the teaching actions and the capacities developed by the

students thanks to the work of memorable teachers.

Table 1. Interpretation and synthesis of results

MEMORABLE TEACHERS DO...	STUDENTS ACHIEVE...
<i>First level</i>	
Transmit commitment and enthusiasm with knowledge and teaching.	Feeling motivated and involved with the teaching proposal.
Prepare classes with diversity of resources. Alternate expository classes with more interactive ones.	Express difficulties and doubts without fear of being wrong.
Attend to the characteristics of learning subjects without losing academic rigor. Explain concepts of different complexity in a simple way.	Participate in the exchange during class. Build new concepts.
<i>Second level</i>	
Evaluate consistently what has been taught.	Understand evaluation as a further instance of learning.
Explain: a) their own learning process as a teaching strategy, b) selection criteria and intellectual procedures of their proposal.	To assume positions regarding the processes of teaching and learning.
Reflect on their practices, on the obstacles they have experienced, and try to improve them (flexibility, innovation). Keep learning.	Understand the process of methodological construction done by a teacher.
<i>Third level</i>	
Show that historical and geographical discourses are social and scientific constructions. Make room for discrepancy, taking into account different perspectives and points of view.	Assume positions about disciplinary knowledge. Example: on encyclopedism and erudition.
To carry out theoretical and epistemological analyzes on the academic disciplinary vocabulary.	Differentiate theories that give different meanings to concepts.
Teach to judge what is read and argued. Challenging, posing problematic. Hypothesize, break with the unique idea.	Develop epistemological curiosity and critical thinking.
<i>Fourth level</i>	
Make the students reason in a valuable and original way in class. 'You can create your own interpretation'.	Build self-understanding and reasoning (autonomy).
Give tools to participate in the public space. Relate academic knowledge to reality. Look at the past from the present.	Contextualize, historize and denaturalize. For example, poverty. Get involved and have a political position.

VII. DISCUSSION

Returning to some of the concepts included in the theoretical framework, it is possible to emphasize that none of the teachers studied fits in the 'executive approach' but rather they are located in the 'liberating approach' for a greater rationality and autonomy.

This is particularly innovative considering that the most frequent in the university classrooms of the country is the

learning understood as reproduction of the knowledge emanated by the teacher, who in his role of authority possessing 'everything' knowledge does not promote exchange and debate, still less the questioning of what is said [20], [21].

To those who advocate unidirectional transmission as the most valid form of teaching in college, the students themselves provide the arguments for understanding why a teacher becomes memorable:

I noticed a change because to learn to look at the reality of another way costs, to be able to see other points of view. When a teacher comes and questions things, moving the floor, that's the important thing. (Student A)

His way of expressing himself, of transmitting knowledge led to his own reflection. Another teacher articulated the theory very well with practice, texts with reality, I liked it a lot, others teachers do not give rise. He taught us to think critically. (Student B)

I feel that I learned a lot from him, it seems memorable to me because he is a teacher who does not just stay in his discipline, he also took other authors, for example from anthropology, including psychology. Try to expand the knowledge and not stay with a single line. He is very generous with the knowledge, sometimes the university teachers are not very generous. (Student C)

It was observed that the results of this team's research on three different cases coincide with the findings of the main national and international studies, consolidating the theory of memorable teachers. On the other hand, each of them provides specificities related to the institutional histories, trajectories and different styles adopted by each teacher, but we have not addressed them here because they are not the axis of the present work.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The extension of specific knowledge about the teaching practices of memorable teachers can contribute to improving the quality of teaching through their socialization among practicing and training colleagues. The interpretation of cases of memorable teachers is relevant as a device that allows the reflection and learning of those involved. Socializing good practices of some teachers can be a contribution for others, a starting point to think about the teaching activity itself. In this way, it is possible to promote awareness of the important role of teachers in forming a critical and non-fragmented attitude, especially when it comes to analyzing social problems.

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