

## Among dreams and cunning attitudes: relationships with the academic knowledge of university students

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### Abstract

*Due to the expansion of university access in Brazil in the last decade, a change of the student profile took place. In order to look into the matter, the present text reports a case study on ten Brazilian university students and their relationships with knowledge, based on Bernard Charlot's theory. Questionnaires, "inventories of knowledges", interviews for data collection were used in the attempt to understand the different types of mobilization for higher education, the meaning of academic knowledge and its value to students of Economic Sciences, Social Sciences, History, Geography, Social Work and Psychology. Three types of mobilization processes for academic activity were categorized: processes of subjects who wish to acquire a profession, processes of empirical subjects and processes of epistemological subjects. Common to all of them is the planning of long-term academic pathways, which will ensure them higher living standards and/or social mobility.*

### Key words

*Relationship with knowledge; case study; university students.*

### Résumé

*En raison de l'expansion de l'accès aux universités au Brésil au cours de la dernière décennie, le profil des étudiants a été modifié. Afin d'approfondir la question, ce texte présente une étude de cas sur dix étudiants universitaires brésiliens et leurs rapports au savoir, fondée sur la théorie de Bernard Charlot. Questionnaires, «bilans de savoir», interviews pour la collecte de données ont été utilisés pour tenter de comprendre les différents types de mobilisation pour l'enseignement supérieur, la signification du savoir académique et sa valeur pour les étudiants en Sciences économiques, Sciences sociales, Histoire, Géographie, Travail social et Psychologie. Trois types de processus de mobilisation pour l'activité académique ont été catégorisés: ceux de sujets souhaitant acquérir une profession, ceux de sujets empiriques et ceux de sujets épistémologiques. Leur point commun est la planification de parcours universitaires à long terme, ce qui leur assurera un niveau de vie plus élevé et / ou une mobilité sociale.*

### Mots clés

*Rapport au savoir; étude de cas; étudiants universitaires.*

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## **Introduction**

From 2003 to 2014, Brazilian State presented a partial social development and a sound expansion of policies directed to the great mass, with emphasis on the number of students from lower classes who had access to higher education. The number of undergraduate students increased by 76.4%; however, the majority of youngsters are still out of the system, since out of the age group between 18 and 24, only 16.3% of young Brazilians attend university (IBGE, 2014, p. 108). Even insufficient, these are the best figures the country has ever had: the total number of students in Brazilian higher education reached 7.3 million in 2013 (Brazil, 2016).

In higher education, entering the systems of knowledge becomes the fundamental objective of students, since the primary function of the university is to transmit accumulated and provisional knowledge, organized in disciplines. These systems of knowledge consist of knowledge-objects; intellectual activity; a linguistic world in which language is codified and standardized; a form of intellectual community, built over time, constantly changing in an uninterrupted debate, since knowledge is provisional because it is built by humans (Charlot, 2009).

Based on Bernard Charlot's theory (2000, 2005, 2006, 2009), this paper discusses university students' relationships with academic knowledge, based on a case study. First, the research that gave rise to this work will be presented. Besides, ten university students' different relationship processes established with knowledge will be problematized.

## **The research**

The research was carried out from 2014 to 2016, at a federal university located in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro. Due to the different realities found in Brazilian public universities, it is important to clarify that this unit is known by some professors and students as "escolão" (big school), a separate unit of research centers of excellence, in which it is expected that teaching will be less dedicated to research and more to the classroom, with the professor sometimes teaching several subjects per semester, as well as performing other community and bureaucratic activities.

With the quantitative change of students and that of the student profile, there was the need to get to know the students in Social Work, History, Geography, Economics,

Social Sciences and Psychology, as a basic condition for consolidating the new areas of expansion of the university and a possible improvement in the educational conditions of the population of the region where the university is located, the northwest of Rio de Janeiro State, a territory of strong production and reproduction of inequality, poverty and social exclusion (Cruz, 2003).

Lately, the issue of university students' integration has begun to receive more attention from national and Latin American researchers (Santos, et al, 2013). The subject of university students, especially the ones from poor families, has recently appeared in the field of studies of the sciences of Education. Part of this academic production has focused on the relation family-school and on the explanation of the processes that allowed the rupture with the original tradition, by relying on a set of possible situations to explain such achievement. Another part of the research seeks to understand not only the inequality in the access of students with low purchasing power and reduced cultural capital, but also the permanence of these subjects in higher education institutions. In this line, in addition to the classical variables of sociology (income, occupation, parents' schooling, etc.), we tried to know the successful school trajectories, in a valuation of the subjects' actions. From these studies, we collected some data about students' relations with knowledge (Kalali, 2006; Bicalho & Souza, 2014).

In order to get to know the students, a quantitative and qualitative methodology was used, respectively, through questionnaires, followed by written reports ("inventories of knowledges") and interviews. The questionnaires aimed at understanding some basic conditions for the constitution of these college students, such as socioeconomic realities, cultural practices and leisure activities, as well as the school flow and the place occupied by studies in their daily lives. It was an exploratory-descriptive study of a quantitative approach, with one hundred and eighty questionnaires answered by students of all courses (with a minimum of 10% of the total number of students in each course). At the end of the questionnaire, a question invited them to continue participating.

In addition to the social, economic and cultural determinants of a student's life, one of Charlot's (2009) ideas was incorporated into the analysis: the importance of understanding that the school journey includes knowing both what students receive from their parents and how they take advantage of it. Before being university students, these people had already been students and had come to university with a relationship with knowledge, studies and university itself, built throughout their history, especially their family and school history.

The students then made “inventories of knowledges” (Charlot, 2009), a text produced from questions such as “which learnings they remembered to have done since they were born”, as well as the agents (people, places, institutions) of these learnings. Then they were asked to write about what they learned at university and what was important of all this learning. Here, we wanted to understand the encounters they had with those knowledge-objects at the university that were different from their expectations before entry and after their reality clash, throughout their learning time and into affiliation (Coulon, 2008). Inventories could point out not only the sources of learning, but mainly the meaning the students gave to what they learned. Inventories were treated as a single text in which we searched for regularities that allowed us to identify processes; in addition, we could obtain an overview of the evoked learning. The following types indicated by Charlot (*idem*) served as a basis: Relational and Affective Learning (RAL), Learnings Related to Personal Development (PD), Intellectual and Schooling Learning (ISL), Everyday Learning (EL), Professional Learning (ProL) and Generic and Tautological Learning (GTL). The classification ended up producing new learning, about Brazilian reality and this group of students in Human and Social Sciences, Ethical, Sociopolitical and Religious Learning (ESRL) and Intellectual and Academic Learning (IAL), the latter made at the university<sup>2</sup>.

Ten students participated in the interview, during which we sought to better understand the place that the university occupied in their lives, the role of basic school, but mainly the mobilization for their studies, the sense given to the intellectual and academic activities required by the university.

### **The students and their processes of relationship with knowledge**

*The relation to knowledge is the relation with the world, with the other, and with itself of a subject confronted with the need to learn. (Charlot, 2000)*

The ten students form heterogeneous groups and have diverse identity profiles, but most of them are known to belong to low-income classes and reached higher education due mainly to recent public policies. We believe that seven students were “extras” (Certeau, 1996), people who managed to deceive the constraints and the many difficulties of life, and that eight out of the ten subjects exceeded their parents' schooling (six of them were the first members of the family to do so). Seven attended public schools, almost all of

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations of these types of learning presented will be used ahead, for the sake of saving space.

them claimed to have few books at home (up to 100) and did not study foreign languages. Three reconcile work and study and only three repeated a school year. Another group of three students is aligned more to a profile called “the inheritors” by Bourdieu and Passeron, because they have already inherited an educational project from the family. Ana Lea, Otavio and Beatriz went to private schools, studied languages and did not need to work and study, since they were supported by their families. In Certeau's (1994) logic, heirs would be those who have a strategy, “(...) calculation (or manipulation) of the relations of force that becomes possible when a subject of will and power can be isolated (...)”, are capable of “(...) capitalizing on conquered advantages, preparing future expansions, and gaining independence in the variability of circumstances” (Certeau, 1994, pp. 94-95).

Common to all university students is the search for planning long-term pathways that ensure them upward mobility and/or social mobility and success, a relationship with strategic time, typical of middle/upper classes. In other words, even if many of these students came from low-income class families and were, therefore, exposed to the instability of the extras, they had developed tactics, namely, “(...) procedures of the weak, powerless, without base to store benefits, increase property and foresee exits, operate in the space of the other, taking advantage of appropriate occasions” (Certeau, 1994, pp. 93-94), which allowed them to reach and maintain higher education. This heterogeneity brought to the university reality students who have new and diverse relations with knowledge, although the traditional function of the university remains: that to enable students to distance themselves from these relations and to enter into “a certain type of intellectual activity”, situating their experiences of life and work in “systems of knowledge” (Charlot, 2006). The relationship to knowledge is a relation to learning, theorizes Charlot (2000). Learning is 1) to take ownership of knowledges as objects; 2) to control activities; 3) to initiate relationships with others and with oneself; 4) to observe and reflect, relating the references that allow us to interpret life, to understand people and to know oneself. This is what we will address here: the different encounters with the “figures of learning” in the university.

In order to know the modes of entry in this “intellectual activity”, their evoked learning will be presented, focusing on those credited to the university. As a starting point, it was raised if the expectations that the students had before arriving were linked to the act of learning, as well as the meaning and the importance given to that which was evoked as having been learned during life and at university. This focus was always present, first

and foremost, considering the mobilizations of the students in relation to the knowledge acquired, that is, what mobilized them to attend university and what they considered more or less interesting and important.

The concept of mobilization is also constructed by Charlot (2000): out of desire, the individual mobilizes towards some object/activity/person and gives it/him/her a sense of value. In order to understand this dynamics, besides the idea of desire and mobilization, the author recalls the concept of meaning, produced within a system, in relations with the world or with others. Desire moves about and aims at various objects, which showed us the need to analyze the objects of desire and the different encounters with the figures of learning, highlighted in both inventories and interviews.

What is the meaning of Social Work, History, Geography, Social Sciences, Economic Sciences and Psychology for these subjects?

Table 1: Mobilization for higher education

Subject/course/period/age	Meanings attributed to graduate studies
1. Ana Lea, SW-4, 20 years old	Learn the profession
2. Nathanael, ES-5, 22 years old	With the gift for economics, to have an opportunity in life, to graduate
3. Beatriz, Psy-7, 24 years old	To become a psychologist at a federal university
4. Robert, Geo-7, 21 years old	Grow, mature along with Geography,
5..Monalisa, ES-3, 21 years old	Realize the dream of making a difference
6. Otavio, CE-7, 23 years old	Learning to have an open mind
7. Luisa, Psy-5, 20 years old	Widening her horizon
8. Adalberto, SS-7, 45 years old	The filling of an emptiness, the life that he always wanted and was not able to. "The place where I found myself"
9. Nicolau, SW-3, 44 years old	Deconstruct myths and build thoughtful thinking; to evolve as a human being; learn a new profession
10. Pedro, Hist-7, 24 years old	Choose what you want for your future in a much more conscious way

SW= Social Work; Geo=Geography; ES= Economic Sciences; SS= Social Sciences; Hist=History; Psy= Psychology

The analysis was undertaken based on the forms of coherence between profiles of processes related to knowledge. These profiles were established by several valid elements of the epistemic or epistemological self constitution, which “(...) is the knowledge self (acquired through Reason, according to classical philosophy; through scientific knowledge, according to Vygotsky), the (universal) subject self of a knowledge that objectifies its objects and distances itself from the context and everyday experience”. This subject “(...) is not given; it is built and conquered, (...) inscribes its activity in an approach of truth, of objectivity, of universality.” (Charlot, 2012, p.1).

The different styles of relationship with knowledge are analyzed in a more sketchy way than in the attempt to elaborate ideal types, in Max Weber's way, since a typological analysis requires a macrosociological or historical interpretation (Schnapper, 2000), which could not be done here. Although the senses of the chosen course were varied and the same subject had more than one desire when relating to knowing/learning, at least three types of processes of mobilization for academic activity have been categorized: processes of subjects that wish to acquire a profession (1 to 3 in the table); processes of empirical subjects (4 to 8); and processes of epistemological subjects (9 and 10).

### **Processes of relations with professional knowledge**

Ana Lea (Social Work, 4th term), Nathanael (Economic Sciences, 5th term) and Beatriz (Psychology, 7th term) acted in the university mainly in search of the construction of learning that will allow them to practice their chosen profession. For Charlot (2006), many university students come with professional experience, have been socially inserted and are searching for a theory that will allow them to understand practical issues.

While studying for her future profession in Social Work, Ana Lea realized something new, which was to look at other human beings beyond common sense criteria (“economic condition or style”). Daughter of an engineer and a housewife, she believed that the university added values to her personal education, since she lived with “very different people, of totally different styles” (hippies, lesbians, gays, dreads, zen etc.), which made her feel a “thump” when she arrived, because she had always studied at private schools, in which students had a profile similar to the people in her circle of

conviviality. Thus, the RALs and PDs evoked were the ones that expressed a better coexistence with other people: “one should not judge someone for anything; look at prejudice as ignorance”. In the interview, Ana Lea said that before coming to the university she thought she would learn to do a little charity and work with human resources at a company. However, what she learned was that the profession is not charity, that there is a Code of Ethics and laws, and that the labor market included companies, health care units and NGOs. The focus of her university learning was a professional content: how to practice her profession and its Code of Ethics, in its various places of performance. This was the most important content of all she learned, and the most interesting was Philosophy, because the professor approached, among other things, the situation of workers since pre-capitalist periods. It is clear that work was the topic of her central interest.

Nathanael, the future economist in the group, believed he had a vocation and made a point of saying that he entered the university through a contest, after having studied all his life at public schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro. He said that he expected to find “a lot of mathematics”, far beyond what one learns in high school, but acknowledged that he was able to see the difference between mathematics and economics in the university: “We see a new paradigm of science: mathematics, economics. That was a change of conception that I had”, he said. On the other hand, he complained that the course was very much focused on theoretical scientific knowledge, rather than on “(...) techniques, which is what the labor market seeks. In a trainee process, in an internship process, they want an Excel analysis. So I'm running after that to get into the job market”, he added. Criticism deepened when he stated that Marxist theory is very intense, with a “dull” theoretical load, as if Marxist professors were trying to “convert students to marxist thought”, which for him had the consequence of creating an aversion to Marx, which was not his case. In his inventory of knowledges, the student wrote that in the university “he learned to look at the world from a different point of view”. To him, Economics used to mean the possibility of getting rich, the understanding of the stock market, learning how to make and read charts and to make analysis of economic, social and political situation. Upon entering university, which he believed it was meant to create professionals for the job market, he acquired the look of an economist, a “360°view”, which meant “(...) to see all the points of a company, which goes beyond something quantitative, a concern that goes beyond economic burden. It became clearer the role of



economics as something that goes beyond the financial market or stock market, directly impacting people's lives”.

The student is a scholar of PET (Tutorial Education Program), “a hidden treasure”, and believed that his supervisor was leading him to relate work to life quality, which roughly meant “to cherish happiness”, less linked to profit and more focused on personal health and the support of one’s family and their happiness:

*“We elaborate a research, then transmit it to the course in the form of minicourses, lectures (...). Afterwards, we work with the community. For instance, Bolsa Familia Program<sup>3</sup>: it happened that some people were receiving the benefit through the bank, then the bank wickedly offered them loans. People thought they had more money than they really did and ended up overdrawing. We organized the 2016 Economy Week. We estimate we have about six to seven annual congresses. This is what has motivated our passion for economics”.*

Nathanael never failed any disciplines and belonged to the minority of students of Economics that never did, since 54% of them do. Studying at this university meant “joy, an opportunity in life” offering new opportunities. His future prospects included doing an MBA abroad and being financially successful along with his family. He, who had entered the university to graduate and become rich, graduated and left seeking life quality. In any case, profession continued to be his major mobilization.

Unlike Nathanael, who declined to make any statement about his parents, Beatriz was the daughter of a security guard and a store clerk, and also the first of the family to reach the university. She recalled that before starting Psychology, she thought she would learn psychoanalysis because “it is a very beautiful profession, because it is helpful. Psychologists build a relationship of trust with their patients”. After entering, she recalled that, in addition to psychoanalytic theory, she learned other theoretical lines of Psychology and what it meant to be human. She evoked many learnings related to relationships and personal development (“how difficult it is to speak of oneself”, “the importance of knowing how to deal with people, being communicative and not being shy”), skills that were “essential to her future profession”. All the knowledges acquired after the entrance to the university are profession-oriented (APro): “to be a psychologist one must be someone who is open to communication and willing to listen”; “A psychologist should not have any prejudice, nor make judgment”. For Beatriz, the function of the university is to transmit norms, values, attitudes and ethical principles.

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<sup>3</sup> It is a [social welfare](#) program of the [Government of Brazil](#) that provides financial aid to poor Brazilian families whose children attend school and are [vaccinated](#).

She affirms that psychologists have to be very careful with ethics, because they are dealing with the suffering of people from different socioeconomic levels and orientations, including sexual, and must develop a “wholly free of judgment” listening. Of all the interesting things she said she had learned in the course, the most important one was that “to be a psychologist one must be open to the new and the different”.

In conclusion, for these students, academic education was valued as professional preparation. The majority of them evoked that learning was linked to their future professional practice. Thus, Ana Lea evoked the ethics of the social worker; Nathanael acquired the look of an economist (“a 360°view”); Beatriz learned that in order to be a psychologist, besides theory, one must know how to accept different people and attitudes.

In this case, university education seemed to matter only as a means to an end, which could signify that there was little consideration of the learning they acquired there or of learning itself (Charlot, 2009). That was our first consideration about this group, that aimed at graduating in a more utilitarian university trajectory, focused only on the arrival at the end, without the establishment of relations with academic knowledge. However, a more careful analysis showed that these Professional Learnings were carried out concomitantly with other academic and intellectual content (AIA) (49% of the evocations of the students of the group), but also Relational and Affective (RAL) and Linked Learning to Personal Development (PD) (24% of them).

Concerning Intellectual and Academic Learning (IAL), these students saw disciplines and theories and the acquisition of philosophical, economic and historical contents as workers from pre-capitalist periods or classic thinkers, whose ideas, applicable to daily life, also contribute to the understanding of the connection between economic and political games. In Nathanael's case, it seems that his understanding was expanded when he acknowledged having seen the difference between mathematics and economics, and the articulation between teaching, research and extension in the PET project. It is also worth bringing up a common academic difficulty expressed by all the students during interviews: reading, comprehension and analysis of academic texts.

These students also spoke about how they learned to deal with differences, to look at the world from a different point of view and to have autonomy. Such learning is linked less to the “epistemological subject” and more to the “empirical subject”, which relates “to experience issues such as good and evil, permissible and forbidden” (Charlot, 2005, p. 44). The author believes that entering the university is to assume another way of being,

a new way to face what one is and what one wants to be. This situation mostly happened with the next group.

### **Processes of relations with knowledge of empirical subjects**

Robert (Geography, 7th term), Monalisa (Economic Sciences, 3th term), Otavio (Economic Sciences, 7th term), Luisa (Psychology, 5th term) and Adalberto (Social Sciences, 8th term) conceived university experience mostly as the mastering of empirical subjects and the acquisition of personal and affective more than intellectual and academic learning.

In his inventory of knowledges, Robert remembered ISLs such as “reading” “writing” and “counting”, as well as ELs (“talking” and “walking”). The student believed that “attending university was necessary” and, therefore, he enrolled at a college preparation course in Brasilia, where he lived. He said that he was “very young” at the age of 17, when he entered the university and did not know what he would learn because no one in his family had a college degree. After entering, he recalled having learned “several things from different perspectives”:

*“(…) because Geography is broad and encompasses a social part and a human part. I learned urban, agrarian, regional, geopolitical geography. In addition, there is physical, technological geography. From a personal perspective, it was very enriching to have contact with different people (teachers, employees, my own colleagues). It is a very useful learning for me, especially since I had no experience, I did not have much contact (I was kind of antisocial), and at university I improved”.*

This statement seems to demonstrate that the university offered him the learning of both academic knowledge and social relationships, affections and personal development. Studying Geography at this university meant “to grow, to mature along with Geography”. It was the case of a course chosen by affinity. Robert ended up smiling and saying: “Geography married me. It’s with me, (...) it's a very intimate relationship”.

For Monalisa, a future economist, being at the university meant fulfilling a childhood dream, which was to graduate: “(...) my mother used to say: Monalisa, you will make a difference”. Going to college was a great gift and a surprise, since she was the first in her class to enter a public university, even before having finished high school. The student wrote an inventory of knowledge rich in PDs that spoke of a young student whose mother was a cleaning woman separated from her father and who learned to fight

for her growth: “not everything is the way I want it”; “I want to make a difference, wherever I go, and that's a difficult task”; “to conquer my dreams, I need a lot of struggle, guts and willpower”; “I need to recognize my mistakes”; “to be the same person in any place or situation”; “to be ethical”; “people want to be heard more and to be less criticized”; “I need to listen more and talk less, being careful with my words”. She also wrote that before beginning the course, she thought that she would learn a lot of calculus, but that from the beginning she realized that teaching was globalized and that, consequently, she could learn Philosophy, Sociology, as well as calculus. For her, an economist learns not only economics, but also politics, statistics, micro and macroeconomics. The fact of joining the university made her learn to deal with people from totally different realities, after having suffered a “shock on arrival” (related to the heavy load of calculation and her difficulty with Portuguese as a second language). Other learning related to the empirical subject was evoked as RALs (“dealing with people of different opinions”) and (“I must keep my good name”). However, she also evoked IALs (“on inflation”; “the reasons our country is often unfair and unequal”) and ProL (“a country cannot live without an economist”). She said that everything she had learned at the university had been important, although she remembered that what she liked the most was the possibility to analyze political proposals through the perspective of Macroeconomics. The student considered that knowing how to deal with everyone was the most interesting (and most challenging) point. Since her first days, she started to deal with people from totally different realities, thoughts, cultures and actions: “I had to learn what to say, how to act with people I had never seen and who had a totally different mind and reality”. Monalisa ended the inventory by writing that “university life is bringing me a background of knowledge and experience that I will take with me for the rest of my life”.

Along his life time, Otavio, a 7th term student of Economics, also counted on sound support to graduate in higher education. But unlike Monalisa, who studied at public schools and had to develop “tactics” of effort, Otavio is the son of a psychologist and a physicist and studied at good private schools in the city of Rio. His choice of a field of studies was the result of a vocational aptitude test. In the process of relation to knowledge, Otavio evoked RALs (“respect”; “companionship”), just as DPs, with emphasis also on personal effort: “where one can reach depends exclusively on oneself”; “How to face adversity”. Before joining the university, Otavio thought he would learn “how to become an economist”, but acknowledged that he learned much

more, to the point of becoming responsible for his finances, solving domestic, personal, and coexistence problems without any help from his family. He learned to organize and manage his life. Still referring to the learning considered at the university, he evoked a ProL: “for the economist, there is a wide market, both at companies and at public sectors”. He recalled that he learned “a lot of politics”; “a lot of economics, as in the unit of historical-social analysis of Brazil. I found the economic development of Brazil very interesting”, he said. For Otavio, studying economics meant “learning to have this more plural view, because in economics you have to be open-minded, even with theories; otherwise, you cannot get to the answer”.

Also, for Luisa (Psychology, 5th term), studying at the university meant the possibility of broadening horizons. The choice for Psychology was out of curiosity, but there was also the possibility of studying at a public institution, relatively close to home. Luisa still lived in her hometown, 110 km from the university, and went through a daily commute to study in the morning, work as a teacher at night and return home. The student said that she had learned that “the world is much larger than the backyard of her house and shelters many more people than her neighbors”, one of the many DPs evoked (“to live with people is to be with them, being touched and touching”; “to speak at the right moment”; “to face problems”; “to make choices”). The student believed that “there is a God who cares, who is a father and a friend, to whom we can always turn”. In the interview, Luisa said that before coming to the university, according to common sense ideas, she thought that she would learn to take care of the mad, to understand human mind and its action on human behavior, besides being able to explain its reasons. She said that she had learned that there were several Psychologies and that human beings (the main subjects of Psychology) were much more complex than she had considered, and that it was necessary to look at it from various angles, respecting and recognizing the limits that each Psychology trend imposed. In addition, she said that she soon realized that she was completely unprepared for that “new universe”, and that she had undergone “a bombardment of information”. She added she had discovered that “the academic knowledge she hoped to acquire would not take place simply and quickly, but it would require effort and even patience”, which led her to a certain despair. However, she never thought of abandoning the course, because she faced it as another challenge. It is remarkable that she had to make sense of what she was learning, since at first she did not see an application for so much information. Luisa said that she had fallen in love mainly with the possibility of dealing with suffering, which was not very common, and

this feeling had deconstructed her idea of madness. The most important thing she had learned during the course was “to realize that everything and every information would lead you to something else up front”. She said she had learned to look at the institution in a broader way and “as a producer of knowledge that goes beyond academic knowledge and consolidates in the social sphere”. For her, whereas a school teacher reproduces the content of a book, in the university there is the possibility of researches, not only memorizing and copying, but also (and mainly) “producing, speaking, being more critical, taking the floor, dialoguing with the other you”. By “running after and reading enough”, Luisa said she had the autonomy to disagree with or agree with what was presented to her, such as Freud's Psychoanalysis and its limitations in the sphere of social practice. She concluded that higher education had led her to reflection and autonomy in a critical way. On the other hand, Luisa considered that the contact with differences and her new look at people - which goes beyond academic knowledge - was the most interesting part of all she had learned, because “the person deconstructs completely in order to reconstruct and, at the same time, tries not lose the initial bond with one's origin”. And she finished: “(...) I still live in the countryside, I go back and forth every day, but I have a different perspective, a different look. I think I managed to expand, but I did not lose my roots, I did not lose that initial base. There are things that we modify; other things, we cannot change”. When asked if there was something she missed about the course, she replied that “there is no teaching on how to take care of oneself”. As if this were really necessary after so much learning linked to the empirical subject.

Adalberto, 45, also reconciled work and study. In his own words, attending Social Sciences “meant filling a void, because I found myself at a point I wanted to lead the life I had always wanted and had not been able to before”. In the interview, he said that going back to school gave him a new life, although studying and working at the same time is not easy. His wife and two children did not accept his going back to studying and he did not have a peaceful place at home to do it, “because in order to study one has to be isolated. Studying is a solitary craft”. He said that he studied at the university library or at the office (he was a city guard) and regretted that he did not have enough time to dedicate to research projects. His inventory was full of multiple learning with the family, school, arts, friends, people he had met, teachers: RAL (“what is love, missing, respect”; “importance of friends”); DP (“life is not fair”), AC (“talking; “cleaning”); IEA (“knowing makes us better people”); and APro (“work has to be

pleasant, even if you do not do what you wanted to be doing, do it well”). Adalberto wrote that before being a university student he thought he would learn “something about socializing, the history of the country and politics”. After entering, he did not want to stop anymore and continued naming AIAs: “we are always learning”; “political science”; “anthropology”; “sociology”. He admitted to be surprised at his achievement as a student, as he felt that he would have much more difficulty in deconstructing his experience and perspectives. In this sense, he exalted the fact that he learned “how good it is to know the unknown, to build knowledge and to convey it to other people”. The student strongly evoked Professional Learning (ProL), how he learned “the spirit of being a teacher, whose learning takes time”; “this is an arduous, pleasant, unprofessional, democratic, revolutionary, bureaucratic, tempting, modern, transforming profession”. At his training job, he understood not only how teachers were devalued, but how passionate it was to be in a classroom: “when I came into the classroom, I forgot everything that was difficult in this profession. It transformed me and I thought that was wonderful!”. When asked if there was any lack of content in his training, Adalberto answered without hesitating: “Brazilian sociology and anthropology”, as well as some other things about professional life, such as working possibilities for social scientists. Adalberto said that he never wanted to stop studying and that he wanted to be a Sociology teacher, because teaching, knowledge and Social Sciences gave him joy and a goal to go on seeking, that is, fulfilling his desire of a better world. He believed that education was the way to achieve a more just world.

This student’s report brought about the understanding that, as a kind of side effect, university experience brings the possibility of building professional, as well as academic and intellectual learning. In other words, being at the university can trigger other relations with knowledge, with emphasis on academic knowledge: Adalberto intended never to stop performing his solitary craft; Monalisa recalled the challenge of reading and expressing herself in the academy, as well as learning the transactions and analysis of politicians through the perspective of Macroeconomics; Otavio learned not only to organize and manage his life, but to have a political and historical vision; Luisa believed that higher education led her to critical reflection and autonomy. She expressed her passion for the possibility of dealing with the suffering of other people as a psychologist, which deconstructed her previous idea of madness.

In any case, for the empirical subject, learning professional and scientific contents seemed to be a process that implied more changes in the way they saw themselves,

others and the world, in various forms of subjectivity less related to cognitive and linguistic scope. In this sense, there are several modes of “learning”, which can not be limited exclusively to scholarly knowledge, but which also implies various forms of subjectivity, whose model is not necessarily the reflexive epistemic subject with great cognitive and linguistic skills (Charlot, 2009, p.273).

These experiences expressed a broadening of the worldview and horizons (as for Otavio and Luisa), of personal growth and maturation, as well as the establishment of an “intimate relationship” with the course (Robert) and the possibility of making a difference (Monalisa). In this sense, academic education was valued as personal education, since graduating meant, above all, broadening horizons, acquiring other ways of relating to others (so different), and discovering oneself. This process was in accordance with previous research results on the relations with knowledge that indicated the preponderance of learning related to personal development (Bicalho e Souza, 2014).

### **Processes of relations with academic and intellectual knowledge**

This group encompassed students who spoke mainly of their passion for the construction of scientific knowledge, that which takes place when the subject develops a critical distance from the context and daily experiences and inscribes his approach in objectivity and universality. The techniques of study and construction of knowledge of Nicolau (Social Service, 3rd term) and Pedro (History, 7th term) were impregnated with the possibility of understanding the complexity and historicity of knowledge. Charlot (2005) calls them epistemological subjects.

Nicolau was among the 3% of men who studied Social Work and believed that the function of the university was “to deconstruct myths and build reflective thinking”. He wrote his knowledge inventory in the form of a personal story. He said he lived in a peripheral neighborhood and was raised by a conservative Catholic family. After the age of thirty, he was able to “overcome his rigid upbringing, based on common sense, and began to question the religiosity, traditions and dogmas” taught by his family. The student then wrote that he learned to “overcome his commonsense upbringing” and that, according to his views, more importantly, he learned “to seek freedom through knowledge”. He remembered that the theological seminary helped him to know more about the Bible and that he ended up becoming a well-informed “protestant”: “God is wonderful” and “The Bible is beautiful”. A military firefighter by profession before arriving at the university, Nicolau thought that studying Social Work “would deepen his



knowledge of human relations, social relations, the history of humanity, why we came up with this organization, with this political structure”, which in fact he was achieving. A central idea was learned at the university, he wrote: “through knowledge we transform mankind”. During the interview, encouraged to speak more about his statement, he said that this “transforming knowledge”

*“(...) is politics, not party politics, but transformative politics, which Machiavelli talks about: conscienciously transforming State and society. You know what you want and where you want to get, to have an opinion, you seek not to colonize others (impose what you want), or make up a situation, but rather, lead other people to reflect, to become aware and to think politically (...). It would be a utopia, which is the art of common good, of a better society. Transformative knowledge is one that is open to knowing more”.*

In the sequence, enthusiastically, Nicholas recalled the subjects he had studied (Sociology, Philosophy) and how he fell in love with Philosophy and the excellent way the professor promoted reflection on humanity. He participated in a research group and said that he used to read all the university texts more than once, besides researching on the internet about concepts, words, doubts, authors, their influences and historical contexts. He emphasized that it was necessary to study at home, because classes only were not enough to get to know authors such as Durkheim and Marx, for example.

Pedro studied History so that he could “choose what he wanted for his future in a much more conscious way”. Before that, he did not have much expectations of what he was going to study, but he learned that “one cannot graduate in history without a lot of effort and passion”. He believed that dedication had to do with personal taste and interest, key characteristics for a student to continue studying, reading and rereading, fundamental attitudes and activities to teachers and historians. In his inventory of knowledge, Pedro evoked a sphere of multiple types of learning that took place during his life, in a thoughtful and elaborate way. They began with RALs and PSs, such as: “group work”, done with a band; “how one learns about people being behind the counter”, while working at his parents’ store; “commitment”; “self knowledge”; “what I did not want for my future”. At his teachers training course, Pedro thought that he would learn “a formula of how to teach”, but he saw that one learned much more, because you learned theories and that “you would deal with human beings, which burst one’s head open (in a positive way)”. In addition to interaction, he said that he had learned to be a mediator of contents to students and that after “we came into contact with the school itself, we saw

that school teachers lacked much of this theoretical and political part, they did not reflect about what was being done, where they were inserted. Not that we will solve it by just getting there and it will change. But I think that can help”. Studying to be a teacher was fundamental both to make teachers enter the classroom reflectively, but also to give one the necessary basis to face public exams. He also considered what he called “interpretative questions”, that is, “learning to problematize information, the greatest of all learning at the university”. On the other hand, during his interview, he complained of what he called “lack of interdisciplinarity”: “I think there is little dialogue between subjects and their class topics, not only in Education, but also in History. Each professor works a diferente way”. Perhaps because of this, Pedro developed the technique of making “reading keys”, defined as “a set that encompasses where that text fits in the syllabus, in the professor’s proposal, in the historiography, in the author's bibliography”, which he also used in his monitoring activities, which he carried out for two years in a row. He participated in a research on the history of colonial America.

### **Final words**

This anonymous hero comes from far away. It is the murmur of societies. Of all times, before texts. He does not even expect them. He mocks them. But in written representations he advances. He gradually occupies the center of our scientific scenery. Projectors abandoned actors with their big names and social coats of arms to turn to the chorus of extras crowded around, and then finally stops on the crowd in the audience. (Certeau).

After this study, it is evident that, with the emergence of this “anonymous hero”, the same university that proposes social inclusion will need to invest in epistemological reflections aimed less at erudition and more at valuing alternative forms of empirical and epistemological learning, as well as in diverse cultural experiences.

The challenge of innovation lies in the search for the creation of new knowledge, through new teaching and institutional practices, including students and their epistemological processes. From a democratic and real perspective, such knowledge must emerge from the set of cognitive practices and criteria for validation of knowledge, from the experiences of social groups that have systematically suffered the injustices of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, once we bring the idea of the “epistemologies of the South” (Santos, 2013).

The same Certeau (1996) still writes that “the current figure of marginality is no longer that of small groups, but that of the marginality of the mass (...), which requires an increase of cunning, of dream or of sense of humor” (p. 13). Is not this added dream and cunning that which these university students bring and which we need most in present times?

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