

## Teaching sensitization at the University: A necessity facing today's academic utilitarianism

### La sensibilización docente en la Universidad: Una necesidad hoy frente al utilitarismo académico

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#### Abstract

The concept of "teacher sensitization" has not yet been the subject of consensus among the theoreticians specializing in this field. Already defined as a behavior, an attitude or an emotion, there does not seem to be any agreement on its manifestations, nor on the impact it has on students. Emerging from a long teaching tradition, this concept is nowadays shown in a complex socioeconomic and cultural framework, in which teachers face difficulties in their daily professional tasks trying to meet goals of an objective and balanced academic improvement, their own intellectual enrichment and that of their students. For the sake of a "sensitive" university, it is of utmost importance that teachers are able to seek the growth of their students, detached from the merely utilitarian vision that prevails in our society, where only that which produces measurable or practical results is what matters and is of interest. This is not and should not be the case. Knowing "how to do" cannot surpass the innate human interest of "knowing for the sake of knowing".

**Sensitization, Teaching-Learning, University, Education**

#### Resumen

El concepto "sensibilización docente" no ha sido todavía objeto de consenso por parte de los teóricos especialistas en este rubro. Ya definido como comportamiento, actitud o emoción, tampoco parece haber acuerdo sobre sus manifestaciones, ni acerca del impacto que éstas tienen en los estudiantes. Surgido de una larga tradición magisterial, se muestra hoy en un entramado socioeconómico y cultural complejo, en el que, para los profesores, se vuelve difícil su ejercicio diario en favor de un mejoramiento académico objetivo y equilibrado, que aliente el enriquecimiento intelectual propio y el del alumnado. En aras de una universidad "sensible", es de suma importancia que los docentes sean capaces de procurar el crecimiento de sus educandos deslindado de la visión meramente utilitarista que impera en nuestra sociedad, donde sólo aquello que produce resultados medibles o prácticos es lo que importa y es de interés. Esto no es ni debe ser así. El "saber hacer", no puede sobrepasar al interés innato en el hombre de "saber por saber".

**Sensibilización, Enseñanza-Aprendizaje, Universidad, Educación**

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## Introduction

*«[...] la sensibilité de l'enseignante est cette habileté à reconnaître les besoins individuels de l'élève du plus simple au plus complexe et d'y répondre adéquatement avec une approche positive, qui favorise le développement social et cognitif ».*

*Tamara, OUELLET (2009, p. 28).*

The concept of "teacher sensitization" has not yet been the subject of consensus among the theoreticians specializing in this field. Already defined as a behavior, an attitude or an emotion, there does not seem to be any agreement on its manifestations, nor on the impact it has on students. For example, when applied to early school ages, for the American psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (1989, pp. 541-552), warmth and enthusiasm are excellent indicators of the teacher's sensitivity; on the other hand, psychologist Sara Rimm-Kaufman also associates this previous ability, among determining factors, to the tone of voice, good communication and willingness to listen on the part of the teacher (Rimm-Kaufman 2005, pp. 287-316); while education expert Robert Pianta distinguishes this sensitization in shared activities, positive behaviors and respect for the student (Pianta, 1995, pp. 295-312). Faced with so many different criteria, according to Canadian researcher Tamara Ouellet: « Nous restons alors avec une idée encore embryonnaire et divergente des comportements et attitudes associés à la sensibilité enseignante » (Oullet, 2009, p. 32).

In our opinion, teacher sensitivity is generally defined as an ability. But the adjective "educable" should be added to its definition. That is, it should not be considered only as an innate ability in certain people who naturally possess a sensitive and empathetic character that enables them to connect quickly and easily with other people's realities, but as an objective to be achieved through academic work.

Likewise, a profession such as that of teacher cannot be left in the hands of sentimentality or sentimentalism –as opposed to sensitivity–, which would lead to making emotional decisions "in the heat of the moment", with ineffective results.

On the contrary, indifference, coldness, and even rejection of the other actors that make up the educational community (students, colleagues, parents, etc.) speaks of a profile of a teacher lacking in vocation, who only sees in the teaching scenario an occupation that provides authority, a certain social status and a fixed salary, forgetting that it is a service to society that entails the great responsibility of objectively and critically educating citizens for the future.

However, a sensitive, equanimous, temperate and constant attitude must be a *sine qua non* condition in our university institutions. This should be considered by aspiring professors, who, in addition to being told that their training does not end when they enter the profession, but it is part of a dynamic of permanent updating, should be warned: « if you do not like the respectful treatment of others and are not willing to work with respect in collaboration and cooperation, you are in the wrong job ». It is as simple as that. In this sense, we fully share the opinion of the researcher in university teaching Marisol Santana when she affirms that

*El rescate de los valores y el amor por la profesión son herramientas que se han excluido del proceso, si bien es cierto que en una sociedad consumista se incrementa la necesidad de ser competitivo, no sólo se requiere de conocimiento científico, se requiere también de la habilidad de interactuar con el otro, reconocer la importancia de poner a disposición de la humanidad los saberes [...] Si bien se ha dado respuesta a programas que responden a las necesidades económicas, se ha dejado de lado al ser mismo (Santana, 2021, p. 3).*

## Methodology

This work is not based on education as a discipline or critical pedagogy, rather it is the result of the experience accumulated in teaching practice and educational management in the university environment. It also derives from the direct and daily observation of the student sector, which allows us to identify its specific problems, and to elaborate, from them, a situational analysis that denounces the scarce importance and the insufficient promotion that is still given to teacher sensitivity in all the cycles and grades of our Universities.

## Development

Within the theoretical field, we can affirm that, in one way or another, and with the corresponding exceptions so as not to incur in anachronisms, teacher sensitivity has been a constant in the history of education. Whether it was called *paideia*<sup>1</sup> by the Greeks or *humanitas*<sup>2</sup> by the Romans, since ancient times there have been educators and schools that have been concerned with the integral well-being of their students. These lines are not the right place to make a historical account, but to expose that in the educational world most of the times problems and topics are presented as novelties when they are not, we refer, for example, to slogans such as "know how to be", "know how to do", mission, vision, values... , issues that have always concerned the real teachers, and that in our time are restored as original achievements, but they are old concerns presented with another more complicated conceptual apparatus (according to the needs of our diverse societies) that requires to be expressed with new terminology. In sum: We now give visibility to ideas that were always present in educational action.

However, since in 2014 UNESCO edited the *Teacher's Guide for raising awareness in favor of quality education*, there has been a proliferation of academic works that, from different approaches, emphasize the importance of dealing with a problem that affects all educational levels. Numerous works have focused on contents such as: emotional intelligence and awareness of physical and/or mental disabilities, gender and inclusion, ethnic and religious differences, cultural particularities and multilingualism, environmental commitment and care, new technologies and artificial intelligence, and a long etcetera. All of these topics show that the subject of teacher sensitivity is much vaster and complex than it appears to be at first sight and that, like any other educational assumption, it can be reviewed and must be reviewed permanently, because it brings to light new realities that are being added to those that already make up our sociocultural fabric, and to which prompt attention must be given in the field of education.

In the university environment, it would be ideal to relate these preliminary reflections to attention to the needs, both cognitive and affective, demands and expectations of undergraduate students, to which teachers must pay extreme and sensitive attention in order to achieve a balanced and integral development in students. The subject in itself is broad, but here we expose some of its fundamental aspects that are not always taken into account, and it is unavoidable that they are urgently submitted for consideration:

In the first place, it is essential that students have a schedule that allows them to make the most of their stay in the classroom, avoiding "dead" hours between the different classes they receive, which generates a waste of time and a notable dispersion of attention, when those free moments could be used for complementary academic activities or even, in the ideal of a harmonious education, sports and artistic activities. The constant complaints from young people about this situation are recurrent. Sometimes, it seems that administrators (who are usually teachers) do not see that keeping students idle while waiting for a class to start generates in them an unproductive and dangerous idleness. If we want students to perform better, we must prevent them from wasting hours between sessions, so they can conveniently manage their daily lives and focus on other academic, professional, cultural or social tasks outside the university premises.

Secondly, it is vitally important that the buildings used for teaching activities have adequate access to facilitate mobility for people with motor disabilities. Teachers are obliged to be promoters of the inclusion of those students who are physically limited to move to the classrooms, dining room, bathrooms, etc. This is not only beneficial for the students, but for all the academic and administrative personnel involved in the work. Solving this problem in a convenient way would generate greater synergy in the university community. It is increasingly frequent, at least in Mexico, that accrediting agencies point out the need to eliminate obstacles that impede accessibility in school buildings, this being a primary requirement to achieve accreditation or reaccreditation of university programs.

<sup>1</sup> *Paideia* (παιδεία, "education" or "training") was for the ancient Greeks the process of raising children, understood as the transmission of values ("know how to be") and technical knowledge ("know how to do") inherent to society.

<sup>2</sup> *Humanitas* (in Latin) indicates the development of the qualities that make man a truly human being.

Trying to promote adapted, dignified and safe spaces is a right that teachers should demand from university authorities, because their task does not end at the end of their class, but extends to common areas outside the classroom (cubicles, libraries, computer rooms, etc.), to provide greater attention to students.

A third aspect to consider, which should not be separated from the above, is the recommendation that educators should be aware of the medical, legal, family, and even work-related problems that some of the students suffer, which can complicate and partially make their occupations impossible. The importance of tutoring, which consists of the continuous follow-up of each student, stems from the above. The tutor has to know in greater depth the disadvantages and deficiencies of the tutored, in order to generate support mechanisms for their welfare. In order to guarantee the success of the tutorial activity, collaborative work among teachers is essential.

The communication channels that teachers generate among themselves, sharing information about the students' behavior and school performance, will make them more sensitive to identify problematic contexts in the students' lives. However, if the tutorships that are developed in each academic orientation do not have the adequate support of a university tutorship program, which homogenizes the operation systems of the tutors, they will not have a promising future for the sake of the students. Likewise, teachers, in order to become more sensitive to young people, should take tutoring courses, since, given the dizzying transformation of the society in which students are immersed, the needs are changing exponentially, which impacts drastically and dramatically in their academic life.

Likewise, as a fourth reflection, it must be taken into account that, nowadays, in a demanding and competitive world, the command of languages has become an essential requirement and a fundamental key to make way in the professional field. Faced with this evidence, teachers are called upon to seek and encourage students to learn foreign languages<sup>3</sup>, at least those that are most in demand in most jobs and functions that link cooperation and international integration of knowledge.

Teachers, being sensitive to the voracious reality that graduates will face, have to be coadjutants in obtaining language skills that make it possible for young people to be qualified candidates in the labor scenario, responding better to its demands. In Mexico, despite sharing a border with the United States of America, students have a low or low-intermediate level of understanding and use of English, which implies an A1 certification, or A2 at the most, when B1 or B2 (Malacara, 2023) levels are required to apply for certain postgraduate courses and be able to compete in the job market, especially abroad. But should students be required to speak at least one or two languages at the end of their degree even if their teachers, in general, do not promote the use of tools, texts or other forms of learning in foreign languages, or even if they themselves do not master any of them? Teachers cannot demand what they are not capable of doing themselves, as this would be incongruous in the formative process.

In addition to the above, let us also remember that learning a language is not only related to a work-related purpose. The study of foreign languages is a convenient tool that serves to broaden the cultural and linguistic horizon. But the desire or lack of interest in learning new languages is defined in part by one's reading habits. A vital deficiency that undergraduate teachers perceive in their students is the lack of inclination to read. If they are not sensitized to this problem, especially in a country like Mexico where the average number of books read per year is 0.5, they will not be able to improve personally, nor will they be able to provide a better intellectual and cultural formation to their students. Reading is an exercise that broadens the cognitive view of knowledge, in the same way that the lenses of a telescope allow the eye to contemplate the firmament.

In the academic field, our era is marked by extreme specialization in the different existing areas of knowledge. As early as in the bachelor's degree, students are asked to choose an area of specialization. This is a mistake at this level of studies. The optimum would be to provide a general education, or common core, leaving specialization for postgraduate studies, since the university is the only space for comprehensive intellectual growth that young people will not find anywhere else.

<sup>3</sup> These languages are mainly English, French, Chinese, Japanese, German and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese.

From this perspective, something that would enrich the graduates would be that, as mediators, the teachers would make possible a certain orderly, thorough and rigorous interrelation between the different scientific and humanistic areas, that is, they would encourage a contact of knowledge through academic events (congresses, symposiums, cultural activities, reading circles, etc.) that would increase the student's knowledge. For example, Physics students should be able to share their concerns with the future philosophers, or the mathematics students should be able to get involved with the arts students. In this sense, teachers should abandon their selfish and restrictive side with respect to academic areas outside their own interests, in favor of the intellectual development of students. In the words of British Cardinal John Henry Newman:

*Así es como concibo una sede de enseñanza de conocimiento universal: la unión de hombres sabios y letrados, cada uno apasionado por su disciplina, reunidos en un trato familiar, en busca de una armonía intelectual, intentando conciliar las afirmaciones de sus respectivas áreas del saber y buscando estrechar las relaciones de sus investigaciones particulares. En este contexto se respira un auténtico conocimiento: los jóvenes aprenden a respetarse los unos a los otros, a consultarse y ayudarse recíprocamente, generando un ambiente de ideas y pensamiento puro y claro en el que cada estudiante contribuye con los conocimientos de su ciencia. Aquí, el alumno se beneficia de esta tradición intelectual, independiente de los profesores, quienes cumplirán con el rol de guiarlos en su elección e interpretación de las materias que escogen (Newman, 2016, pp. 88-89).*

It is of utmost importance that teachers are able to ensure the intellectual growth of their students, by distancing themselves from the merely utilitarian vision that prevails in our society, where only that which produces measurable or practical results is what matters and is of interest. This is not and should not be the case. The "know-how", mentioned above, and which does not cease to have its importance, cannot surpass the innate human interest of "knowing for the sake of knowing": "Knowledge satisfies a need proper to our human nature in constant search of its perfection, since its mere presence is valuable in us, because it perfects us, although externally it does not seem to provide or favor us in anything." (Newman, 2016, p. 90).

Despite their efforts, it is at the undergraduate level that teachers are generally faced with a lack of motivation to study on the part of young people. The teacher's sensitivity towards students should lead him to try to sow in them a hunger to cultivate the spirit:

*Ya Cicerón [en De officiis, Libro I], al referirse a la excelencia del intelecto, consideraba que la búsqueda del conocimiento por sí mismo era una condición prioritaria para alcanzarlo, sosteniendo que, una vez cubiertas las necesidades básicas de nuestra naturaleza, además de las afectivas y sociales, el conocimiento es el primer bien que nos atrae, y en cuanto quedamos libres de estas exigencias y preocupaciones que nos apremian, el hombre tiene la búsqueda de la Verdad (Newman, 2016, p. 91).*

On many occasions, and in the face of students' demotivation, a vice into which educators easily fall is that of a "comfortable" professional practice, which is reflected in outdated teaching materials, in the scant desire to correct the work that they themselves demand, as well as in the fallacy that the more information they provide to students, without proportion or purification, the better it is. In this sense, the sensitization of teachers must start from working in favor of an objective and balanced improvement that encourages their own and the students' intellectual enrichment, without falling into:

*distraer y debilitar la mente proporcionándole una cantidad insensata de temas e información, así como suponer que una noción rápida de variadas ramas de estudio es engrandecimiento, cuando esto no es más que superficialidad en el saber. Se espera que se aprendan muchas cosas a la vez, en vez de un aprendizaje gradual de una cosa después de otra... (Newman, 2016, p. 109).*

Much of the desire of undergraduates to join a postgraduate program is due, to a large extent, to the satisfaction obtained in their previous studies, and teachers are sometimes unaware of this. But what comes next, and how is sensitization experienced at postgraduate university levels? In relation to this topic, there are always unauthorized voices that state that master's and doctoral programs are no longer scenarios that require teacher sensitization, an opinion that we do not share.

On the one hand, educational policies, when they mention this aspect (and many others), do not go beyond proposing a series of good intentions without much conviction. On the other hand, what really interests the administration and university graduate management bodies is to invoke growth indicators, such as knowledge generation, terminal efficiency, social retribution, labor market insertion index, etc., in order to write positive final reports full of "laudatory" statistics, disguising the reality of inefficient planning, incompetent professional practice and mediocre training results. On top of all this, the concept of "sensitization" is deployed, which in practice is reduced to a slogan that remains a dead letter. Graduate students, no matter how advanced their schooling age may be, still need to be the object of sensitivity on the part of teachers, since most of them come dragging a myriad of personal and/or family problems of different kinds, as well as still presenting gaps in their academic training that they have not known how or have not been able to fill in previous cycles. Teachers cannot forget at any time, even with students at this level, that:

*La preparación universitaria es una gracia dirigida a un bien superior y esta debe apuntar a elevar el tono intelectual de la sociedad, cultivar la mente pública, refinar el gusto, ordenar principios para la conducta, expandir las ideas, facilitar el ejercicio del poder político y a armonizar las relaciones de la vida privada. La educación entrega al hombre cierta claridad y conciencia de sus propias opiniones y equilibrio en sus juicios; lo dispone hacia la verdad sobre ellos y le proporciona además la elocuencia para expresarlos y la fuerza para recomendarlos (Newman, 2016, p. 122).*

As in previous degrees, master's and doctoral students need greater and more effective attention from their professors, especially from their thesis advisors, with whom they will interact, generally for two years in the master's programs and four years in the doctoral programs. Along with the appropriation of the teachings that their studies entail, they must also receive concrete guidance to see where it is convenient for them to channel their efforts (conferences, academic stays, publications, etc.), and they need, at all times, apart from training, an accompaniment that instills security and self-confidence in them.

Both the advisory function and the tutorial activity make it possible to directly appreciate these needs of the trainees and to intuit many other things, which makes it possible to detect more serious problems in them in time (insecurity, depression and anxiety in the face of an uncertain future, physical and psychological illnesses, etc.), and to channel them to experts who can help them to resolve such crises or to alleviate them. In recent years, unexpected events, such as the last pandemic that began in 2020, have been shown to highlight the vulnerability of both undergraduate and graduate students.

Another aspect that should not go unmentioned here is the need to cultivate teacher awareness among colleagues. At times, the educational system, so prone in Mexico to burdensome bureaucracies and annual evaluations, which entail a distinctive economic resource, is a source of dissension. Prioritizing one's own professional goals is not a bad thing; on the contrary, it stimulates teachers by directing them to constant feedback and updating, which benefits students. What is negative is teacher isolation. We live in a time of unquestionable increase of research groups, since there are research issues that cannot be solved unilaterally, requiring the cooperation and collaboration of academic peers in a work of interdisciplinary convergence.

However, this dynamic requires from teachers a sensitive behavior towards others, the ability to resolve conflicts, and an authentic and sincere appreciation of the contributions of others. It goes without saying that a conspiratorial, harsh, defensive work attitude, full of continuous disagreements, only destabilizes and sinks the ship of an academic institution and with it its crew members, to social, national and international discredit.

Today, there is an appeal to recover humanism in universities, or to design and implement a neohumanism, which allows to effectively inculcate necessary values in teaching-learning, and to increase the skills and competencies unavoidable in our work environment, in which emotional competencies must be included. Planning and implementing the teaching and learning of emotional competencies should be regarded "not only as transversal competencies for the socio-personal adjustment of the teacher.

But also as specific tools to generate adequate learning and collaborative environments as well as to favor the emotional development of the students" (Palomera, 2008, p. 449). At the same time, the university system has to provide educators with mechanisms for continuous training and updating, since "the teacher of today will have to show: good intellectual, moral, emotional and social development and be able to promote it in the diversity of their students, as well as knowing how to work with the entire educational community, investigate their reality and adequately manage the centers" (Palomera, 2008, p. 447). These multiple functions cannot be carried out without close collaboration between the professors, the academic units of assignment and the university administrative bodies.

## Conclusions

The concept of teacher sensitivity, which has arisen from a long tradition of teaching, is nowadays found in a complex socio-economic and cultural context. It brings together binomials, apparently antagonistic, such as feelings and reason or coercion and autonomy..., contradictory disjunctions with which teachers are confronted daily in the exercise of their profession. It should be understood that it is not a matter of choosing one or the other option without considering the opposite one, but of achieving the necessary and desirable balance between both possibilities, since otherwise we would obtain a biased guideline that would materialize in dogmatic, intolerant and excluding teachers and learners, whatever the direction taken.

In our days, in the totality of contemporary societies, plural societies, a call to serenity is necessary, more than ever. Serenity first in the academic environment, to instill it in the students and to achieve peaceful educational contexts, since only in peace can intellectual growth, personal maturity and transcendent sense be achieved.

Finally, and in conclusion, we insist once again that all of the above should not and cannot be carried out by the teacher alone. There is a lack of interpersonal exchange and collective action to achieve a real sensitivity that can be extended to society, of which the University must always be a driving force for change.

On the other hand, it is the responsibility of society as a whole to recognize and stimulate the work of educators, since this incentive reaffirms their initial vocation and makes them grow as teaching professionals.

As concrete strategies to implement and advance the practice of teacher sensitivity in our classrooms, already in 2005 the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) proposed: sensitivity workshops, social skills; coherent technical management work (monitoring and evaluation of projects, preparation of ad hoc calls for proposals, search for resources, coordination with other institutions, etc.); social integration; mediation in intercultural contexts; education for peace; international cooperation; sensitive knowledge about particular problems of other peoples and countries... In short, pro-social thinking; social integration; mediation in intercultural contexts; education for peace; international cooperation; sensitive knowledge of the particular problems of other peoples and countries... In short, pro-social thinking (ANECA, 2005, p. 132). Quite a challenge; but being a "teacher" has always been, is and will always be that: a constant challenge.

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