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Cultural processes, social change and new horizons in education

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Abstract

The current high level cultural research and education should explore knowledge production beyond institutionally validated contexts and take into account the impact of produced knowledge and its usability in social contexts. In order to attend this rising need, the Universidad de las Américas, Puebla, Mexico, offers a trans-disciplinary Ph.D. program in Creation and Culture Theories with a participation of researchers from social sciences to arts and humanities with innovative pedagogical strategy where students' research work is inserted in an Institutional Research Project, with a regular scaffolding by an Institutional Group of Researchers.

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1. Introduction

It has been supposed that the context of the contemporary information society and the expansion of the digital technology and webs of social media would detonate a critical analysis of the character of knowledge and a democratization of the knowledge production making possible the use of non-textual languages in the processes of creation and transmission of knowledge beyond the usual quality of research supported by academic standards. In the case of artistic and cultural high level research and education the situation is complicated, beginning with how we should understand the current ‘social contexts of knowledge’ and ‘usability of knowledges’, their impact in the contemporary societies and how they should be inserted in the institutionalized systems such as universities. In order to attend this rising need of research of alternative creative practices in communities of emerging economies such as Mexico, the Universidad de las Americas, Puebla, Mexico, has offered since 2006 a trans-disciplinary Ph.D. program in Creation and Culture Theories with a participation of researchers from a wide range of disciplines from social sciences and economy to arts, architecture and urban studies. Unusual pedagogical approach through a tutorial system that provides scaffolding by faculty together with a whole group of associated researchers and fellow students, detonate a high level, trans-disciplinary research in order to detect, explore and potentiate alternative knowledges as vehicles to lead to a social change and to a socio-culturally sustainable development, as detonators of cultural practices and knowledge production beyond the Occidental canon.

In the academic world, the intellectual authority is accrued through the quality of research validated by common practices and institutionalized systems, such as academic conferences, refereed journals and publications, etc. that permit a reflexive and critical debate. Further on this debate, as the results of the research work, should impact broader social contexts and provide concrete indicators of the usability of the knowledges produced. In the ideal case, the external indicators match the consensus reached during the critical disciplinary debate (Biggs, 2006). In the case of research and education in humanities the situation is quite different and complicated, beginning with the fact, how we should define ‘impacting broader social contexts’ and ‘usability of knowledges’; humanities and other disciplines related to creative processes with non-rational approaches to the knowledge production are changing the main concept of knowledge itself. Exploring different experiences of alternative knowledge production, our students and researchers have focused their studies on multiple creative practices linked to spatial interventions, performances and material and immaterial artwork produced by local communities or through a cooperation between them and artists; we have studied everything from graffiti, temporal shelters of poor people made of cardboard, popular carnivals with their performativities appropriating of public spaces, urban murals and street art, theatre of the oppressed, etc., describing the social reality and means of survival of people living in peripheries of the great metropolis of emerging economies as Mexico. In this sense, not only a researcher, innovator, creator or qualified experimenter occupies the role of an ‘expert’, but also the common people interacting with her or him. Or sometimes it is the common people alone that leads the knowledge production and transmission processes and the disciplinary professional only is there to gather and research the alternative knowledges produced. The cooperation between researchers, creators and communities, or the research of alternative, non-textual knowledges require of a special kind of creativity and sensibility in order to be able to capture the special meanings of individual and collective manifestations as these go beyond whichever accustomed canonical or cultural rule as constructs of everyday life and as local understandings of the world and its socio-cultural relations and meanings.

On the other hand, migratory movements from Latin America to the United States and Canada create interesting transcultural situations where original cultural meanings, expressions and identities are transported to new territories and reformulated by the local culture, as in the case of the ‘chicano’ culture. The new, hybrid, socio-cultural messages are transmitted back to the homeland to the family in the place of origin, again detonating cultural and social transformations. The socio-cultural to-and-fro goes ever on and as well as these hybrid knowledges transmitted through them, thanks to the digital and social media; the digitalized culture and communication is currently transforming local and migrant identities, the social structure of their communities and the way of life, and the character of popular culture and art.

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