Sociological Teaching

Remote Teaching and Sociological Reflexivity: A few Insights from Brazil

João Marcelo E. Maia
School of Social Sciences (CPDOC FGV), Rio de Janeiro.

Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic deeply affected institutions of higher learning worldwide. As most universities' campus closed, faculty were urged to engage with emergence remote teaching. This paper discusses how an individual experience with remote teaching in Brazil triggered a sociological reflexivity about the classroom. It draws on the concept of "sociology as pedagogy" by Halasz and Kaufman (2008) to explore how insights from theorists discussed in class helped to improve knowledge about teaching sociology. The paper makes the case that in a context shaped by deep inequalities, such as the higher education system in Brazil, it is important to search for practices of "sociology as pedagogy" that build from alternative forms of knowledge production.

Keywords: Teaching sociology; sociological theory; sociology as pedagogy; sociology in Brazil; Higher Education in Brazil

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic deeply affected institutions of higher learning worldwide. As most universities' campuses closed, faculty were urged to engage with emergency remote teaching, even with no proper preparation or adequate equipment. This situation sparked an ongoing debate on teaching strategies and the enduing effects of the pandemic over higher education (HE) in general.

Social scientists rushed to this debate. Within a few weeks, a series of social media posts, YouTube videos and webinars discussed a range of specific issues, from

how to conduct ethnographies during social isolation to what exactly should we be teaching if we are to be true to our mission as critical sociologists.

In a recent editorial piece for "Teaching Sociology", Michele Kozimor (2020) offered three takeaways from the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the mental and physical suffering of students and faculty and on the impacts on academic productivity. The rush for online learning is the main topic of Teräs et al. (2020), who urge academic managers and researchers to be careful with digitalization and technologization. They argue that while digital tools may open new perspectives for pedagogy, the role of big companies in providing market-driven digital solutions may bear a negative impact on higher education.

The debate is far from finished, but Euro-American perspectives are still dominant. The reason is that the scholarship on teaching sociology is still focused on the experiences and practices from the Global North, making collaboration between researchers and teachers worldwide a pressing issue if one wants to really build a global sociology (Lyon et al., 2020). My goal here is to contribute to this broader dialogue by presenting a brief reflection on teaching sociology during the pandemic in a highly unequal country from the Global South - Brazil.

I argue that remote emergency teaching/learning challenged assumptions about the classroom thus increasing sociology as pedagogy (Halasz and Kaufman, 2008) and opening space for new teaching practices. However, the inequalities that shape HE (in Brazil and other parts of the South) and the resilience of Eurocentrism require more inclusive forms of sociology as pedagogy that build from alternative modes of knowledge production.

The text has two sections and a short conclusion. I begin by presenting the system of higher education in Brazil and how it responded to the campus' shutdown, calling attention to the diversity in the system and the relevance of the digital divide. In the second section I outline my personal experience teaching "Sociology II" in a prestige private institution in the city of Rio de Janeiro, focusing on how sociological reflexivity helped me face new challenges and change classroom dynamics. I close the text trying to bridge the gap between a personal and unusual experience and the broader picture of HE in Brazil, offering a few sociological insights on the need to include new forms of knowledge production that enrich idea of "sociology as pedagogy".

1 Pandemic and higher education in Brazil

The system of higher education in Brazil is composed of a) a public system funded by the state (either the federal state or state governments) which is largely free-of-charge and enrolls around 25% of undergraduate students; b) a vast private sector which is responsible for nearly 75% of enrollments. In the private sector, there are for-profit institutions, which have been growing dramatically in the last decades, and not-for-private ones, such as the Catholic universities.

The cohort of young adults with a higher education degree – 18% of adults between 25 and 64 years old - is still low compared with countries such as Argentina (36%) and Chile (25%), not to mention OECD's (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries (39% average) (https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_BRA.pdf). Therefore, democratization of higher education has been a pressing public issue in Brazil for a long time, especially for the prestigious public institutions, which recruited students mostly from the middle and upper-middle sectors until very recently (Salata, 2018).

The system started to expand in the mid-1990s, with a boost from the for-profit private sector during the first Cardoso's term (1995-1998). During Lula's terms (2003-2006; 2006-2010) and the first Roussef's administration (2011/2014), a set of public policies contributed to a greater increase in enrollments. These policies had mixed orientations: while programs such as PROUNI and FIES[1] aimed at increasing enrollments of low-income students in private institutions, REUNI focused on expanding the public federal system by creating more vacancies and new federal universities. In 2012, the federal government enacted Law 12.711, which reserves 50% of vacancies in the public universities to students graduated from public high

[1] FIES is a student loan scheme created in 1999 during Cardoso's second term and reformulated in 2010 under the Worker's Party administration. It provides credit with low-interest rates for students attending private institutions. PROUNI was created in 2004 during Lula's firs term. It provides scholarships which cover part of tuitions in private universities in exchange for the tax exemptions which these institutions enjoy.

schools[2]. Within the 50% ratio there are subdivisions according to social class (measured by family income) and race (self-declaration by students)

Results are mixed. While the body of students in the federal system has never been so diversified, the for-private sector vastly benefited from policies such as PROUNI and FIES, with the emergence of highly lucrative organizations that now play a major role in Brazil's stock market (Martins, 2013). According to Knoble and Verhine (2017), the for-private sector made around U$ 14 billion in 2015, contributing to turn the sector in the tenth component of Brazil's economy.

When the pandemic arrived in Brazil in early March[3], the initial responses were similar: most institutions of HE closed nationwide. Slowly, the differences emerged. While the private sector, which have been heavily investing in distance online education (EAD) due to financial reasons, moved quickly to remote teaching, most federal universities declined to do so, in face of the pressure by both faculty and students who claimed that the digital divide was a major barrier which could not be easily overcome. In fact, a research conducted by TIC Domicílios in 2019 showed that only 71% of Brazilian households declared to have internet access (https://cetic.br/pesquisa/domicilios/indicadores/). Besides, many students from low-income families do not have access to laptops and rely on cell phones with highly unstable connections (in the same survey, figures drop to 69% if we consider households with family income up to 2 minimum wages).

The example of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), one of the largest in the country, is paramount. During the months of April and May, the Division of Information Technologies and Communication in UFRJ conducted an online research with students (UFRJ has nearly 60 thousands of students enrolled) which showed that 91% of undergraduate reported that they had access to broad band internet. Although the figures may seem high, one must not forget that nearly 10% of undergrad students do not have access to broad band! Besides, when the survey crossed social class with broad band access, the numbers showed significant inequalities, as

[2] In Brazil, most students from low-income families attend the public secondary system but cannot secure a place in the prestigious public universities due to intense competition for few vacancies.

[3] On March 9th, Brazil confirmed local transmission of COVID-19, and on the 20th the Ministry of Health announced community transmission in the country

only 85% of low-income students had access to broad band internet (https://ufrj.br/noticia/2020/07/02/pesquisa-revela-percentual-de-estudantes-com-acesso-internet)

The problems of remote learning are not restricted to broad band access. The domestic environment is also determinant for the quality of learning. In the case of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), an online survey which is still under way shows that 11% of students reported that did not have a proper place to study at home, while 17% claimed that they only had access to such a space for a brief period of time.

Some public universities which have more access to funds and infrastructure quickly provided equipment to low-income students, as it was the case for the University of Sao Paulo (USP) and the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), but most federal institutions do not have these amounts of resources. Besides, the Ministry of Education has been widely criticized for its inability to support universities and schools during the pandemic, making the situation even more challenging.

Only in July, four months after the shutdown, federal institutions began to reorganize their schedule to include remote teaching for the coming semester[4], employing a variety of strategies to deal with the digital divide and the divergent demands from the student body and faculty. For instance, UFRJ decided to organize a special semester with not-obligatory courses targeting at senior students who are about to graduate.

How do Brazilian sociologists and social scientists are reflecting on this issue? A good source is the National Association of Graduate Programs in Social Sciences (ANPOCS), which issued a series of 87 bulletins about the pandemic including a group of texts about the impact of Coronavirus on teaching and education. Not surprisingly, most of these texts deal with educational inequalities and the digital divide, and almost none of them discusses teaching strategies. This will probably change in the following months, as sociologists resume their teaching commitments. For now, I hope to contribute to the debate with a brief reflection from my personal experience.

[4] In Brazil, the first semester starts by the end of February and closes by the end of June, while the second semester being in August and closes by December.

2 Sociological insights from the new classroom

Since 2008 I hold a tenured position in a not-for-profit elite private institution in Brazil. As one of the few sociologists in my units, I have overseen most courses on sociological theory from the so-called classics to contemporary theories. When the pandemic took hold in Brazil, I was teaching Sociology II, which in my institution is a subject focused on social theory during the twentieth-century, covering a temporal span from the early twentieth-century until the mid-1970s. Originally, the syllabus was a bit Eurocentric, focusing too much on US sociology, but eventually it was changed to include Latin American authors and non-white sociologists.

My syllabus started with readings on US sociology (pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, functionalism and microsociology) and Norbert Elias' figurational analysis; it then moved to Latin American's theories on modernization and dependency, followed by readings on critical theory, either from the Frankfurt School or by feminist theorists from Europe and Brazil.

Presential classes were held once a week, every Thursday from 09:20 A.M. to 12:50 P.M., a schedule that required a special strategy to avoid fatigue. My original course design included a first section lasting one and a half hour combining lecture and questions by the undergrads followed by a second section in which students were presented with a practical question which required collective discussion. For instance, the lecture on George Mead's theory of socialization was followed by an activity in which students were required to use the concepts of "self" and "generalized other" to identify the social groups that shape the ordinary reflexivity of a high school student who is about to apply for college. These discussions were held in small groups in a classroom, something favored by the relatively small number of students attending the course – roughly 25, which is highly unusual for undergraduate classes in public institutions.

When our institution closed, we had a one-week break for Zoom training and then we resumed teaching. I decided to keep the syllabus and the scheduled activities, but I had to make a few changes to deal with the challenges of remote learning. Eventually these changes contributed to increase the sociological reflexivity about the classroom and the way I taught social theory.

The first challenge was related to the corporal dynamics within classes. In our "pre-Coronavirus" meetings, we had lively exchanges in which I could see all my students and move around them while talking. This connection was missed. Besides, most students kept their camera off due to instability in internet access, which made things even more complicated. This seems to be a minor detail, but it became an issue after I reflected with students about Erwing Goffman's theory in "Presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman, 1985)[5]. In this famous text, Goffman points out the role of face-to-face interactions to keep situations "going on" smoothly. The role of the body is crucial for managing impressions and interpreting other's emotions and intentions. While zooming, I could not help but think of how the lack of corporeality required greater physical and mental labor to keep classes going on.

There was no easy solution for that. I decided to remake the first section of classes. In the first 30 minutes, I presented a brief lecture using videos or slides, and then I would open the floor for questions and comments. As most colleagues noticed, it is weird to talk for so long while not being able to see everybody around you, but I struggled to keep the pace. In the second section, I organized the group activities, using the "Break Out" function in the Zoom applicative. I usually gave 20 minutes for each group to privately discuss the practical questions at stake, entering these private rooms every time I was requested to do so.

But other issues were trickier. In Goffman's theory, the physical properties of social settings are deemed crucial for assuring mutual understanding about what is going on in each situation. All of a sudden, teachers were stripped of their classrooms' usual objects, such as blackboards, PCs, slides' projector or even a room with walls, so they had to put an extra effort to turn a disorienting display of virtual windows exhibiting private environments into a new classroom. In my case, I tried to engage with the functionalities available in the digital tool, such as "chat" and "share screen" to employ other learning objects that remind students of our social setting, such as book covers, songs, and interviews with sociologists.

[5] Goffman's original book was published in 1956, but the Brazilian translation came out in the middle 1980s. We used this edition in class.

The second challenge has to do with students' emotions and mental health, which are not a new issue in higher education. A recent report by GEMAA[6] explored data from 2,424 surveys conducted between February and June 2018 with undergraduate students from 63 federal institutions (Portela, Feres Jr and Freitas, 2020)[7] . Researchers found that 83.5% of students reported at least one emotional problem that affected academic performance, with anxiety (62%) leading the answers. The pandemic likely increased this problem due to the social distancing and the feelings of anxiety and loneliness which followed suit.

In the case of Sociology II, some students reported depression, lack of sleep and problems of concentration. Although we have been discussing these issues in our institution for a few years, the pandemic and remote teaching made us all more aware of how difficult it is to engage with these students to help them. The interplay of social structures and self-control of emotions – a central theme for the sociology of Norbert Elias – came to the forefront. Certainly most professors of sociology are not mental health specialists, but what can we do in our classrooms besides indicating mental counselling when we spot any problems? How do the social dimensions that structure these classrooms increase the possibilities of mental health issues?

I soon realized that we must think about the whole structure of the course, from the syllabus to assignments and activities, if we are to take seriously the challenge of improving the interactions in classroom while keeping everybody sane. I left behind the idea of a 'one fits all' type of assignments, giving more space for individual choices and special deadlines. The experience during the pandemic should not be an exception but a blueprint of how we should conduct our learning environment with students.

In the end, most students were able to catch up with remote learning and showed great enthusiasm, but a few dropped out while others missed classes due to family problems and personal issues. I learned that the labor involved in keeping social interaction within the classroom is even greater online, but some strategies reported above could work "off-line" as well. My personal experience with remote

[6] GEMAA stands for the Multidisciplinary Group of Studies on Affirmative Action from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)

[7] this sample corresponded to 35% of the enrolled undergraduate in the first semester of 2018

teaching triggered sociological insights about the classroom, but how could this reflexivity be employed in contexts marked by deep inequalities, such as the higher education system in Brazil?

3 Closing remarks

Halasz and Kaufman (2008) use several examples to demonstrate their idea of "sociology as pedagogy", which they describe as "(…) a model that encourages us to use our sociological knowledge to reflect on and address the social dynamics of education" (Halasz and Kaufman, 2008: 301). However, much of the models they describe come from Euromerican theorists, which lead us to question the universality of these insights about the sociological dimension of the classroom. Besides, in a context shaped by deep inequalities, such as the HE system of Brazil, it is important to search for practices of "sociology as pedagogy" that build from alternative forms of knowledge production. In Sociology II, two texts provided a blueprint for this task.

The first one was authored by Silvia Cusicanqui (1949-), an Aymara sociologist working in Bolivia (Cusicanqui, 1987). Cusicanqui discusses the challenges of doing research with indigenous communities and criticizes Marxist theories for homogenizing these groups and failing to recognize the centrality of colonialism in shaping the Nation-State in Bolivia. She presents an account of the THOA (Workshop of Andean Oral History) and explains how the Oral History project she conducted with her colleagues allowed indigenous communities to reclaim their 'long history' from the limits of the Nation-State history.

The second text was authored by black Brazilian scholar Lélia González (1935-1994), who analyzed the role of racism and sexism in Brazilian culture. González (1983) brilliantly combines psychoanalysis, theories of discourse, and antiracism scholarship to examine how black women in Brazil are stereotyped. Her prose is also unique, as she writes in 'Pretuguês' (black Portuguese languages), a vivid form of expression which includes slang and rhythm that challenges the whiteness of academic Portuguese.

Cusicanqui (1987) and González's (1983) works offer fresh sociological insights about what we do in classrooms. First, they make us question what exactly is "theory" by

exploring forms of knowledge production that do not fit into standard accounts of scientific discourse. This is not just about including authors and texts from the Global South in the syllabus, but also about broadening the scope of theorization to address experiences and life-histories that are usually overlooked. Second, they help us to rethink "teaching" by questioning the role of academic experts and suggesting alternative forms of engaging students and communities with the production of knowledge.

These are not new issues in Brazil. The long struggle of black and indigenous movements against racism in education gave birth to Laws 10.639/2003 and 11.645/2008, which require the teaching of black and Indigenous histories in all levels of education, with changes in syllabus, textbooks, and other teaching materials. Since then, we have witnessed new initiatives in HE that are slowly changing the dynamics of the classroom.

For instance, in the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), a degree on Ethnodevelopment was launched in 2011. Regular classes are combined with learning experiences in indigenous communities conducted by students who are themselves recruited from these groups. In most federal universities, black students are actively engaging in groups (the "coletivos") that challenge dominant forms of pedagogy, while black faculty members are exploring the philosophical implications of an antiracist education (Nogueira, 2012). In a recent survey with black activists Pereira, Maia and Lima (2020) found out that education is the one of the key issues at stake for antiracist politics.

All these exciting developments gained traction as a new generation of non-white students claimed their places in the public universities due to the results of affirmative action programs. This phenomenon could open the discussion for new forms of "sociology as pedagogy", which articulate theoretical insights about teaching and learning with new forms of knowledge production that reflect non-hegemonic experiences.

Unfortunately, all these initiatives are facing great risks in Brazil, as Bolsonaro's administration (2019-) is overtly conservative and shows no signs of support for the rights of historically disadvantaged groups. That is exactly why this dialogue is even more urgent, which makes ISA's Pedagogy Series an important tool to build bridges between North and South.

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