



# Changing evaluation: a must in times of uncertainty

## *Cambiar la evaluación: Un imperativo en tiempos de incertidumbre*

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### Resumen

El objetivo de la investigación cuyos resultados se presentan en este artículo consistió en generar información que permitiera comprender la complejidad del proceso educativo, con la intención de proponer soluciones a problemas fundamentales que afectan el aprendizaje y el logro educativo del alumnado. Se realizó una investigación cualitativa en una universidad pública, la técnica para la recolección de los datos fue la entrevista semiestructurada a profesores que imparten las materias de la formación básica. Entre los principales resultados destaca que la evaluación del aprendizaje es una práctica idiosincrática y contextualizada, que la falta de formación docente es un factor que afecta las concepciones y prácticas de evaluación y, que las formas participativas de evaluación son incipientes, entre otros. Las principales conclusiones indican que la evaluación sigue centrada en la figura del profesor; que el personal docente valora tanto el dominio del contenido disciplinar como las habilidades mediante las cuales el alumnado expresa dicho dominio (habilidades de comunicación verbal y escrita, aprendizaje autónomo, creatividad, pensamiento crítico...), que se emplea una metodología diversa y amplia que incluye exámenes escritos, participaciones en clase, exposiciones, trabajos escritos (ensayos, ejercicios, resúmenes), entre otros. Estas estrategias se centraron en la evaluación del aprendizaje, más que en una evaluación *para* el aprendizaje y *como* aprendizaje.

**Descriptor:** Evaluación, evaluación del aprendizaje, evaluación para el aprendizaje, educación superior, profesorado, investigación cualitativa.

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the design and major results of a qualitative study on the evaluation practices of faculty from a public university. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews to faculty members who teach undergraduate general courses. The main results of the study include: that the evaluation of students' learning by faculty is an idiosyncratic and contextualized practice; that the lack of teacher training is a factor that negatively influences evaluation conceptualizations and practices; and, that participatory forms of assessment and evaluation are very incipient. Some main conclusions of the study are: evaluation is still very much faculty-centered; faculty value both the mastery of disciplinary content and the skills through which students express this mastery (verbal and written communication skills, autonomous learning, creativity, critical thinking...); faculty use a diverse and broad evaluation methodology, including written exams, class participation, presentations, and written products (essays, exercises, summaries). They focus these strategies on the evaluation of learning, rather than on an evaluation for learning and as learning.

**Keywords:** Evaluation, learning evaluation, evaluation for learning, higher education, faculty members, qualitative research.

## 1. Introduction

This article derived from the research project: “Perspectives and teaching-learning practices of critical thinking at the university”, whose main objective was to generate information that would allow understanding the complexity of the educational process, with the intention of proposing solutions to problems that affect the learning and educational achievement of students.

The research focused on the subjects that integrate basic training: Sustainability and environmental culture, Introduction to mathematical thinking and Academic Literacy, which are taught in the first quarter in all the degrees offered at the university. The emphasis on these three key areas of the formative process is because it is considered that their in-depth study can provide information on the dynamics of the educational model as a whole, around academic writing practices; argumentation practices (critical thinking); and learning evaluation.

During the conversations with professors, different topics of their interest emerged, and evaluation of learning was selected in this paper, since it is considered by some authors as the “touch-stone” of the curriculum, given the significant effects it has on both teaching and learning. As mentioned by Hargreaves et al. (1998, p.183) “evaluation is the tail that begs the dog”.

Evaluation is a subject that has evolved in recent decades as seen in the literature consulted (Reyes et al., 2020; Jiménez, 2019; Moreno, 2020). Some authors point to innovations in this field, and although its background is long ago, it is in the second half of the 20th century and so on, when its analysis expands and deepens (McMillan, 2013).

Since the objective was to analyze the concepts and evaluation practices of the faculty, these were the initial questions that guided the research: How is the evaluation process developed in the subjects of basic training? What is the methodology used to evaluate students? Who participates in the evaluation and how is that

participation? From the content taught, what information was really learned by students? How do professors know that students have learned?

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

In recent decades, evaluation in education – and, particularly, learning evaluation – has undergone a major transformation and has boomed worldwide. A first change concerns the concept of learning evaluation. For a long time, the term learning evaluation has been used, most recently as assessment as learning (Dann, 2014; Earl, 2003), learning-oriented evaluation (Carless, 2015), evaluation for learning (McMillan, 2013; Moreno, 2020; Brown, 2019), and shared and formative evaluation (Molina et al., 2020; Fuentes & Salcines, 2018), as an alternative to traditional evaluation. In other words, a mutation in language is identified to refer to evaluation as a participatory, formative and shared process between teachers and students, with learning as the main objective.

However, this is not just a change in language, but these expressions imply depth and important practical implications. These terms refer to a significant transformation of the notion of evaluation, which consisted of measuring the knowledge acquired by students, and which was observed in their ability to reproduce—as reliably as possible—knowledge in an assessment. Currently, the emphasis is placed on the acquisition and development of competences, understood as a complex and integral construct that includes knowledge, skills, techniques, arrangements, attitudes and values, among others. This new vision is not about educating them to memorize an enormous amount of data and inert information, but to be able to select the appropriate schemes, as well as when and how to use them to respond effectively to the problems or situations of their personal and social life. Problem and situations that are characterized as complex, ambiguous, incomplete and challenging (Denyer et al., 2007).

This change in the evaluating perspective affects its contents, i.e., what is being evaluated.



To a large extent, the content of the evaluation is determined by the programs of study, but professors at the university, considering autonomy, have a more room to interpret, adapt or modify the educational program of the institution. This also has a notable impact on how to evaluate learning as it opens the door to use more flexible, collaborative, participatory, democratic and human methodologies among participants (Santos, 2003; Ibarra et al., 2020).

A second change concerns the actors of the evaluation; time before the main protagonist of the evaluation was the professor with the full decision-making power to design, manage and conduct the evaluation. Students played a passive role, whose participation was limited to responding to the instruments provided to them. Nowadays it is known the benefits that the participation and involvement of students have in their own evaluation process (Heritage, 2007).

(...) research on evaluation as learning has documented the benefits of student participation during the learning process – particularly how peer evaluation and self-evaluation improve meta-cognition and learning as a result of active participation in the evaluation of their own work. (McMillan, 2013, p. 6)

However, in order for students to have a significant participation in the evaluation, two conditions are required: 1) professors must generate a classroom culture that promotes self-assessment and peer evaluation. In this scenario, the classroom is seen as a place where students feel respected and valued and consider that they contribute to the class; and 2) students must possess the skills to create a learning community in which individual differences are known. Compliance with codes of conduct in the classroom, such as: listening others with respect, respecting speaking time, responding positively and constructively, and valuing the different skills of their peers, will enable all learners to feel safe in a learning environment where it is possible to learn with and from the other.

To achieve this, it is very important that professors have the skills to model classroom safety standards through their own performance. It is simply a question of educating by example (Moreno, 2020).

In this scenario, the promotion of participatory evaluation modalities such as self-evaluation (Taras, 2003) and peer evaluation (Sridharan & Boud, 2019; To & Panadero, 2019) is essential. Thus, the focus is no longer placed on the professor, but on a professor who becomes a mediator, guide and facilitator of learning environments, and accompanies the students in their formative process to provide guidance and feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2015; Moreno, 2021). Thus, the following is proposed:

When evaluation is emphasized for learning, different competences are needed in professors, including the need to clearly understand the cognitive elements that are essential to student learning, such as being able to identify errors in cognitive processes that prevent students from advancing their learning process. (McMillan, 2013, p. 5)

Thus, the power of evaluation is no longer exclusively concentrated in the faculty, but is shared with the students, who also assume the responsibility of making value judgments about their own performance and their peers (Cáceres et al. 2019).

A third change points to the evaluation methodology. Previously, the exam was the instrument used to assess students' learning, or rather to verify their ability to memorize data and information. In recent decades, there has been a transition from monism to methodological pluralism. In addition, as the competences involve different contents (conceptual, procedural, attitudinal), in order to be able to account for student acquisition or mastery, the faculty requires the use of different strategies to collect evidence that allow them to describe, as faithfully as possible, the competences to be assessed. These are evaluation strategies that are more



open than conventional exams (Moreno, 2012; Monereo, 2009).

However, the possibility that this new discourse of evaluation can modify the concepts of professors, and thus transform their evaluation practices is disrupted by multiple factors, among which stand out contextual factors. The context in which the faculty does their work will undoubtedly affect their action, as well as their commitment and involvement with the process of change. School culture and professional teaching culture have long been known to be key elements in achieving a true transformation of the school (Hargreaves, 1999; Santos, 1995; Pérez, 1995; Bolívar, 1993).

This work is placed in the field of higher education, which introduces a dimension of the topic. The university is considered by many as a conservative institution; therefore, it seems more resistant to change than other institutions that make up the educational system. In addition, the academic staff is mostly composed of professional experts in a disciplinary field, but with little or precarious teaching training. Hence, their ability to evaluate student learning is often poor or limited. In this regard, it is stated that:

A finding was that professors lack mastery in the construction and interpretation of the assessments they design and use to evaluate students' learning, although this mainly concerned the construction, administration, and interpretation of summative evaluations. (McMillan, 2013, p. 5)

In general, professors' conceptions of learning evaluation seem far from theoretical advances, and their practices are commonly based on the experience, common sense, or emulation of other actors (colleagues, former professors, experts) who exert some influence on their performance (Moreno, 2009).

On the other hand, we are living a time of great transformation of life. This new scenario poses enormous challenges for the university, which requires it to take risks in the face of the

need for transformation of the teaching-learning process, with evaluation being a fundamental component. It is necessary to see evaluation from a new perspective (Stiggins, 2002). It is a must that professors get rid of concepts of teaching, learning and evaluation, because they represent a heavy burden on the progress of university teaching (Stiggins, 2004).

In today's era, marked by uncertainty and perplexity, it is imperative to break away certain knowledge, skills, habits and provisions that were perhaps valid at another time and place, but that are now unproductive and, instead, build other valuable learning for the formation of the present generations. It is a matter of unlearning old schemes and re-learning new ones, a double process that can be complex and sometimes painful, but certainly necessary. Of course, this does not mean that previously learned information has to be eliminated, in this case, with regard to evaluation, it will be necessary to retain those professional resources that remain valuable and relevant for an action that responds to the demands of contemporary society (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

## 2. Methodology

Qualitative research is a contextualized process that places the observer in the world. It is an interpretative and naturalistic approach of reality, which studies events as they happen, trying to understand or interpret them from the meaning of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative researchers in carrying out their tasks deploy a wide range of interrelated interpretive practices that seek to gain a deeper understanding of the object of study. Hence, the use of several interpretative practices in the same research is common (Flick, 2004).

In the qualitative research process, academics use various strategies for collecting empirical data, including case studies, personal and introspection experiences, life stories, interviews, observations, cultural productions, and histo-



tical, interactive, and visual documents. These materials describe the everyday problems and meanings of people's lives.

The case study was used as a methodological design in this research. This entails an inquiry process characterized by detailed, comprehensive, systematic and in-depth analysis of the case studied (Rodríguez et al., 1999, p. 92). More than thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with full-time faculty who taught some of the subjects of basic training (Sustainability and environmental culture, Introduction to Mathematical Thought and Academic Literacy). As part of the methodology, student interviews and classroom observations were also conducted. This article is limited only to the data analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted to six professors who teach the above subjects.

In this regard, it should be noted that the results presented in this article are "preliminary", as the research is broader and more plural. The criterion for choosing interviewees was to teach the subjects of basic training. Interviews were conducted in the offices of professors and lasted approximately one hour. Professors knew about the research project and agreed to participate voluntarily. At all times, the anonymity of the interviewed group was preserved.

The information presented in this article is contextual and idiosyncratic. The aim was to have a better understanding of the subject under research. However, although the data do not represent the entire faculty, it may indicate what might be happening with other professors in similar conditions and contexts.

### 3. Analysis and results

The analysis and interpretation of empirical data from field work shows the topics that concern professors about the evaluation of learning in the subjects investigated. In this section, the results were organized according to three categories mentioned in the theoretical framework:

(A) Concept of learning evaluation, (b) Actors of evaluation, and (c) Evaluation methodology.

#### 3.1. Conception of learning evaluation

Based on the teaching methodologies used, as well as the nature and type of activities required, professors express their notions of what they consider important to the training of students and, therefore, what to value in the assessment: "I ask for analysis, a small paragraph to say what they think, essays, I insist that they tell me what they think, not to summarize (...) essays, many essays and many round tables."

There are professors who confuse the frequency of evaluations with an act of justice, "just as to be fair with evaluation, which is by the way a lot of work, but still, I assign different activities". An interviewed professor talks about evaluation in her students:

You mentioned something important to me because it is very demanding. If there is something I have worked on all my life is definitely evaluation, because I do not teach and someone else evaluates, that is what I would like most, you really do not know how much work it takes because I would like students to think and analyze, but many times I have works that are summaries of students who do not miss any class and who are in the front row asking because they never understand (...).

From the beginning of the course, the professor must communicate the rules of the evaluation to generate certainty and confidence in the student. But these conditions are not always met because sometimes the professor does not fully know what to evaluate, and although there is some flexibility to make adjustments based on the conditions of the group, it is preferable not to introduce drastic last-minute changes. "I give students a lot of cases that are in the annex, so they can choose, all cases are very related to the environmental problems, those four classes and



now this one, and I am not yet very sure what the final work will be.”

The above testimony indicates that, even if there are institutional rules on how to perform evaluation, it is finally up to the professor and the group. The evaluation appears to be a discretionary act, which reveals the professor’s conception — in this case — of evaluation as an idiosyncratic and contextualized practice, based on his/her good professional judgment as an evaluator.

Given the nature of the contents of the subject Sustainability and Environmental Culture, the teaching methodology that includes presentations (of the professor and students), interrogation and debate in class, among others, is suitable to generate a climate where students acquire theoretical concepts and develop socially desirable attitudes toward the preservation and care of the environment (Fresán et al., 2017). The moments when controversial topics are addressed and that generate opposing positions among the members of the group allow to promote critical thinking and the defense of universal values around a sustainable culture.

The following testimony reveals the mix of different criteria used to evaluate student’s presentations; the professor presents the evaluation rubrics from an integrative perspective in which both forms and content matter.

(...) that they stand out properly, that they have organized their research, that it is coherent, that it has substance, everything that is considered in a presentation. If they start the presentation and finish it in three minutes, for example, that will reduce their grade compared to someone who did a deeper investigation, who reflects, who does not read the slides, but instead uses them as support. Everything counts, I make an integral evaluation.

### 3.2. Actors in the evaluation

Although there is still a great number of professors who are the protagonist of the evaluation, certain moments of active participation

of students in this process were documented. In this sense, Álvarez (2001) argues that if self-evaluation does not involve self-qualification, it is a fraud for students and it must be avoided, which means that if a professor decides to include self-evaluation, he/she must carry it to its final consequences, accepting that, at the beginning, students who lack experience in self-evaluation may incur biases, either by underestimating or overestimating their performance. The same can happen with peer evaluation. In this regard, a professor tells her experience:

I ask them to write a comment about participation, what kind of participation, what kind of activities they did, and based on the description or comment they need to grade themselves, which allows me to appreciate what kind of activities they are valuing, i.e., the student searched on the web, contributed on (...). In general, they normally grade themselves with a low grade, I grade them better.

I always give them methodologies of this type (...) they have difficulty correcting because they have emotional limitations with writing, i.e., they cannot write (...) Sometimes I ask them to read as a support for writing, but what works best is for them to look at what they wrote and share those texts.

The latter allows to assume that students may not have developed skills to co-evaluate or that this practice of peer evaluation with qualification is not something that students like by the consequences it may have on the relationships with their peers (Kaufman & Schunn 2011; Liu & Carless, 2006; Moreno, 2021).

The development of a regular class allows to understand the role of the professor as a guide or facilitator of the student’s learning; a professor describes a class in which the student presents his/her work to the group, thus providing elements for the interaction in the classroom:

There are moments when I speak to clarify certain topics that I think are important and, in



the end, the students ask questions, sometimes they do not ask and sometimes, depending on the subject, they are very interested and create controversy.

The latter shows the importance of the professor as a mediator between the cultural content to be learned and the student; this function is essential especially in a curricular model centered on learning, such as that of the university investigated.

### 3.3. Evaluation Methodology

There are some professors who have practically ruled out exams, perhaps this is due to the disrepute of these instruments. In this case, it was observed that a lot of professors use other tools to assess learning. However, if their teaching, learning and evaluation concepts preserve a conservative character, i.e., if professors still see evaluation as a synonym of measurement or qualification, it is unlikely that a real change will be generated even if they incorporate “alternative” evaluation methodologies (Valencia, 1993), since these are assimilated to a traditional assessment scheme; in any case, it will only be artificial innovation that will not last in time.

Although some professors agree on eliminating exams, there is still some confusion at this point, since it is not a question of discarding these instruments, because as long as they are well designed, these can be (and in fact are) a valuable tool for valuing certain learning content, as facts and concepts. It is recommended that their use be combined with other assessment techniques and tools to achieve a more complete vision of learning achievements.

(...) I evaluated all participations that they had until the fourth week, I averaged them and I gave them the grade (...) in general there were no doubts. I'm going to do the exam next week. The students who remain are doing a good job, there are more than three quarters and now we are going to exam week, I said it

is going to be on this subject and other topic discussed, it is going to be a written exam.

In general, class participations are considered in the evaluation, although each professor, according to his or her judgment, can clarify what he or she considers to be a ‘good’ participation. For some, it is enough for students to speak, regardless of the quality of their participation, while for others, it is a matter of making a valuable contribution to the proposed topic or answering the questions correctly. “(...) when I ask them, when someone speaks, when I ask direct questions like ‘what do you think’, ‘what was your work about’”.

Sometimes the professor’s criterion appears to be limited only to the fact that the student has fulfilled the task, without considering the quality of the product or the result obtained. “As long as they have included everything I asked for, it is fine for me”.

Class participations and written works (essay type) are common components of the evaluation in the subjects of Sustainability and Environmental Culture and in Academic Literacy; in essays the subject can be free or can be selected by the professor. In Sustainability, posters are also part of the evaluation, which are presented to the university community. This type of training experience shows the skills and creativity of students when they are involved in pedagogical activities that they like.

I evaluated this subject with participation and at the end of the course I asked them to do a research project: Climate change, water in Mexico City, garbage or recycling, I told them to do a poster. The first year we made a poster trying to say ‘Hey you, take care of water’ (...), someone made a sustainable house, things that are very surprising. These guys have a lot of potential.

In response to a question made to the professor who teaches Introduction to Mathematical Thinking regarding what and how he evaluated the work of his students, the interviewee replied:



I evaluate both the process and the result, maybe some students follow other paths to get to the result, maybe they are applying the procedure but with miscopied data, but the procedure is correct, so I take that into account; they may use a similar method but not exactly the same, and it is important because it is something creative, even if it is not the method they try to remember, they have the idea and that means they are understanding, so(...) I take it into account, even if it is not completely correct.

This response shows that the professor values both the process/procedure to solve a mathematical problem as well as the result, which promotes the ability of the students to take risks, by adopting routes other than those indicated by the professor to solve a problem or exercise. This strategy can be a favorable path toward self-learning for the student. This professor considers the time, the writing and spelling of an exercise. It is striking that a math professor grades writing, but is good because it favors the integral formation of students.

I also consider the time in solving exercises and things as spelling. And in the tests, I focus first on the exercise that has to do with the process, with the result, then on time and a third element is if writing and spelling are appropriate; I have told them that I will take that into account, so far, I have only underlined the grammar mistakes, but next time these can influence on the evaluation.

In math, it is common for some students who start university to lack of prior skills and knowledge to address topics of the school program. Given this situation, the faculty introduces a remedial course to solve the math gaps in students.

(...) when we were teaching this course, I can tell you that there were deficiencies like: the rules of the exponents in algebra and the solution of fractions. I always applied a diagnostic exam and always obtained the same results; those were the most frequent problems [...].

In questioning the group interviewed about the origin and content of the remedial course, this was their answer:

The remedial originated because in reasoning a problem said: 'the fifth horizontal is this and the time used is proportional to something', so, it starts with a high school topic: reasons and proportions, and then [the students] were stuck and said 'I do not know what that is', and we found that if they did not know they would not be able to move forward, that if they do not have math tools they cannot shape the reasoning, so the remedial included topics of high school.

On the other hand, the academic literacy workshop has as its main objective that students learn to write academic texts, so students do different types of exercises to develop their writing skills. A professor discusses the types of work that students perform.

The first work was a critical review of a reading, another was an informative text and an argumentative text on the same subject, a third paper was an article and the fourth will be another platform-based article.

The professor was questioned about what and how she evaluates this type of work, and her answer is interesting because she knows where to focus her assessment.

I created a rubric that explained each aspect, for example in the introduction I grade the objectives, the context of the topic; in the theoretical framework I grade wordiness, that the paragraphs have consistency, that there is a logical development, a good use of the language, a language appropriate to the topic being addressed and the context in which we find ourselves; in the conclusion I check that there is a closure, that the important idea is taken up again; I also grade the management of references, that the students in the text quote their sources, we use APA because they know the European style and the idea is that they relate with others as well.



During the interview, the professor was asked if, in addition to the rubric described above, she used other instruments and whether she considered other criteria for evaluation. Her perspective agrees with that of another of her colleagues in considering in the evaluation both the mastery of the content and the ways to communicate it to others, i.e., the content and the style. “We do some oral exercises so they know how to stand in front of the public and how to present information or arguments, how to use visual aids, and for that I also created a more specific rubric for oral presentations.”

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

This research showed that evaluation of learning is an important topic at the university (Reyes et al., 2020; Hernández et al., 2020). Answers of professors allowed to see predominance of evaluation of learning with no indication of the evaluation’s perspectives for learning and as learning. Evaluation continues to be professor-centered (hetero-evaluation) with some attempts at a formative and shared evaluation through participatory modalities such as self-evaluation and co-evaluation.

From the analysis of the data, attempts were revealed by the faculty to expand and relax the tools of evaluation of learning, but there was no change in their concepts of evaluation. The prevailing idea of an evaluation at the service of certification and measurement remains in force, in the detriment of an evaluation for understanding and improving learning, which would allow to move toward an evaluation for learning.

The lack of teacher training for evaluation of learning is evident, and this is because the university faculty, in general, have little teaching training. Although it is fair to say that, in this specific case, evidence was collected on the teachers’ efforts to innovate (Guzmán et al., 2015) and develop in their students —through teaching and evaluation practices— higher-order intellectual skills (critical thinking, divergent

thinking, self-learning, creativity...), which is consistent with the pedagogical principles of the educational model of the university under investigation.

The evaluation methodology includes mainly written exams, class participations, written texts, presentations and exercises or tasks. Evaluation practices include both formative and summative, with an emphasis on the latter. In other words, since at the end of the course the students’ learning needs to be measured, it seems that grades really count for both teachers and students. This surely conditions the entire training process (González et al., 2012). In this sense we agree with Gallardo (2018):

In a metaphorical sense, the value of the grade obtained from an evaluation process could be compared to a thick mist that impedes clarity in trying to define the paths that will actually lead to making a difference, which precisely relies on achieving better decisions from the results of the evaluation, which will be obtained by a better preparation of the professor in this significant aspect of the learning process. (p. 8)

Another point that is noteworthy is the conflict of values that evaluation can generate in some professors. Finally, the problems related to gaps in the previous training of students have led professors to implement remedial measures in certain cases, so that students can achieve the intended learning objectives. This last issue, of course, also modifies evaluation. These findings reveal the need for a change in evaluation to obtain a better learning experience (Heritage, 2018), in a world steeped in permanent change and uncertainty.

The perspective on the subject aims at strengthening evaluation as a continuous, formative, participatory and shared process, which uses various evaluation devices to account for the different types of student learning. There is a need for professors to develop competencies for evaluation of learning, and for educational institutions to support this professional deve-



lopment, so that a balance can be gradually achieved between the evaluation of learning and for learning, because they are both important. All this considering that: "School learning is very complex and evaluation is imperfect."

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