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The Discourse Traps on the Evaluation of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT – The Discourse Traps on the Evaluation of Higher Education.

The discourses of higher education assessment proposals become traps by not articulating their *what for?*, *for whom?* *what?* and *how?*. In this paper it is elucidated how such traps are constructed by analyzing the proposal of planning and evaluation of a public institution of the state of São Paulo. The proposal analysis is grounded on the ideas of Paulo Freire and other authors who investigated the proliferation of assessment systems as control. It is concluded that, in the discursive construction of the different assessments proposals, often the idea of control is present. Although an emancipatory discourse is used, they establish an instrument of quantitative control that can generate an increase of exclusion, productivism and, competition.

Keywords: Higher Education Assessment. Evaluation Instruments. Institutional Assessment.

RESUMO – As Armadilhas do Discurso sobre a Avaliação da Educação Superior.

Os discursos das propostas de avaliação da educação superior tornam-se armadilhas ao não articularem o seu *para quê?*, *para quem?*, *o quê?* e *como?*. Neste artigo, explicita-se como tais armadilhas são construídas a partir da análise de uma proposta de planejamento e avaliação de uma instituição pública do Estado de São Paulo. A análise da proposta tem como base as ideias de Paulo Freire e outros autores que investigaram a proliferação dos sistemas de avaliação como controle. Conclui-se que, na construção discursiva das diferentes propostas de avaliação, frequentemente, está presente a ideia de controle. Embora utilizem um discurso emancipatório, elas instauram um instrumento de controle quantitativo que pode gerar um aumento da exclusão, do produtivismo e da competição.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação da Educação Superior. Instrumentos de Avaliação. Avaliação Institucional.

There are many traps in the world and it is necessary to break them (Ferreira Gullar).

Introduction

The discourse on evaluation propagates the idea that it is an instrument to achieve the quality of education and, therefore, it has become recurrent, leading to several assessment proposals, many of these linked to the idea of control, although making use of a speech apparently emancipatory, creating several traps to their beneficiaries. Such traps appear in different ways: conceptual, statistics, discursive, among others that integrate the assessment universe. To break these traps, it is necessary to know them, without it, we take the risk of defending evaluative proposals so-called emancipatory that do not correspond, indeed, with a reflective education proposal. Aiming to explain these traps, we adopt as reference Paulo Freire (1987), who asserts the need for questioning the *what for?*, *for whom?*, *what?* and *how?* of all public policy.

These issues seem trivial, but they are not; it is not possible to say how to evaluate if we do not know the *why* or *for whom*. According to the answers given to these questions, we will have one or another evaluation conception that will present different consequences. We can have an assessment which helps to exclude the most fragile, or yet, an assessment that combines an education of excellence with social inclusion, it all depends on the answers given to these initial questions.

This paper aims to explain the dynamics of what we have baptized as *traps*, present in the evaluation proposals from higher education institutions (HEI). In this text, we designate as *traps*, the proposals that make the juxtaposition between the *what for*, *to whom*, *what* and *how* without effectively articulating them in a coherent way. Therefore, a proposal ends up creating a trap to the extent that it proposes a *how* that excludes people and, however, uses a justification (what for) defending the inclusion.

In order to realize this analysis, we choose the proposal of planning and assessment developed in 2017 by the São Paulo State University Júlio de Mesquita Filho (UNESP) through its Own Evaluation Committee (known as CPA), in the document entitled "Planning and Assessment at UNESP: proposal for a redefinition of the starting and via point" (Unesp, 2017). The reason for choosing Unesp case lies at the invitation from the Teachers Association of Unesp (known as Adunesp) to participate in a roundtable to discuss the self-assessment proposal of the institution.

The research presented in this article is considered qualitative, more precisely a case study that focuses on the analysis of a planning and evaluation proposal. In accordance with André (2008), what defines the methodological option by the case study is the knowledge that it will generate, thereby the basic question when adopting this methodology is what is learned when studying a particular case. The knowledge generated by the case study is more concrete, because it is based on a

real experience, moreover, is more contextualized, since it starts from an existing situation.

In the reading of the document and criticisms sent by professors to Adunesp, we raise the hypothesis that the document contained some *traps*. Using as the guideline the questions suggested by Paulo Freire, the document analysis was made. After the roundtable, the document was resumed, being redone the methodological path with the purpose of deepening the analysis and dialog with the literature in this field.

The document containing the proposal, drawn up by Unesp Own Evaluation Committee, is divided into eight sections, being the first two intended for the rescue of the current institutional self-assessment, the following three are dedicated to the principles that guided the proposal elaboration, and the last three explain the proposal characteristics and its operationalization.

In order to analyze this proposal, this paper is organized in three moments. At first, we will analyze the discourse trap present in the proposal for a redefinition of the starting and via point brought in the document mentioned. In the second, we will discuss three types of traps: the conceptual, the statistical and the idea of continuous progress contained in the evaluative discourse. In the third moment, we will make our final considerations.

The Discourse Trap

The discourse trap builds itself when pronouncing a speech on some subject using ideas of easy acceptance for the population majority. As Foucault mentions (2009, p. 9), discourse is a game of writing and reading; society, on its turn, produces different types of discourses, with different intentions, therefore “[...] in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures [...]”.

Based on generalized consensus, Foucault (2009) points out that some of the discourses convince many individuals, although proclaiming values that are different from what they defend. In this way, conceptual traps are built from a speech that unites opposing values, but that often appear, on a superficial analysis, as complementaries.

A large part of the discourse present in the assessment proposals is built in a contradictory way. Often, in the justification (*what for*) are used speeches of the human being valorization, and to operationalise (*the how*) their assessment proposals, they do it from meritocratic concepts. An example of this construction is the *World Declaration on Education For All: Meeting basic learning needs*, published by Unesco (1998), which presents the results of the Jomtien Conference held in 1990 in Thailand.

This statement brings in its preamble an emancipatory speech with a focus on the social. However, on the execution, it proposes control practices, predicting actions based on a managerial approach

aligned with an economist vision, of teachers' accountability and unaccountability of States. Such actions end up stimulating the competition between schools, the overvaluation of merit and reward (Unesco, 2018).

One of the mechanisms in the discursive traps commonly found in the assessment proposals is referred to the propagation of a hegemonic speech about its positive effects. For Moita Lopes (2003), the construction of a single and global speech can lead people to be easily manipulated and, as consequence, defend ideas that prejudice them in the long-term. To deconstruct such speeches and identify what is at its base is the only way to avoid what we have called traps.

We can infer that there is currently a *global discourse* about the assessment and, according to Torres (1996, p. 134), among the diffusers of external assessment conception are the international organisms, by defending the idea that the quality of education can be measured through grades/points, "[...] quality is located in results and these are verified in the school performance". This simplistic vision, greatly boosted by the media, stimulates, above all, the competition.

The neo-liberal model of policy, besides the structural changes, makes itself felt in propagating an ideology which promotes individualism and competitiveness, legitimizing the very existence of this model. "These ideological and practical changes of the State are instituted as common-sense ideas which, by their turn, shape the new institutional structures and practices of the new State regulatory regime" (Robertson; Dale, 2001, p. 129).

Souza and Oliveira (2003) corroborate with the ideas of Robertson and Dale, stating that the logic of capital and market started to influence education. In this way, values such as competition, ranking and the idea of quality associated with quantitative results became central in public policies. As a result of this process, the evaluation mechanisms have become common and associated with the idea of quality.

The discourse of the analyzed proposal has two moments, the first, of contextualization, presents the principles (*what for*) mainly linked to an emancipatory view of assessment, proposing as a starting point five values dear to the university: autonomy, transformation, fairness, transparency, and comparison. However, in the second moment of operationalization, when presenting *the what* and the *how*, utilizes productivity and competitiveness values for the construction of performance control indicators.

Productivity and competitiveness are not principles present in the first part, these principles guide the assessment to meet market interests (*for whom*). In the proposal, the trap not only consists at leaving implicit the *for whom*, overlapping a *what for* with distinct values from the *what* and *how*, but it is also a trap in the way they are articulated.

In the document, the discourse is structured as follows: it is proposed that each University Department uses a range of indicators that will compose a final performance index. A list is presented with mandatory and optional quantitative indicators and other elective indicators

can still be inserted for each one of the Departments. For index consolidation, each department defines the weight to be given to each indicator within the established limits. At the end of the process, each department will have a range of indicators that will measure its productivity.

Although the proposal does not foresee an index creation, it provides elements for a ranking and, consequently, a competitiveness. The trap consists of the fact that the principles announced indicate the Department's liberty to choose control indicators, without ceasing, therefore, of hurting their autonomy. In other words, the discursive trap consists in subordinating the principles of autonomy, transformation, equity, transparency and comparison to the principles of productivity and competitiveness through the free choice of indicators.

The assessment proposal analyzed is tied to what we can call flexible remote control. In managerial policies, control mechanisms are created through standard indicators with a quantitative nature, that "[...] contributes to changes in the state control technology" (Ball, 2006, p. 12). For example, the Preliminary Course Concept (known as CPC) is an indicator that allows the quality measurement with the institution performance, without the need of expert visits to assess the quality of courses (Barreyro; Rothen, 2014).

Managerial proposals use standard indicators for the control, in the case of Unesp proposal, the departments choose the indicators and weights that will be used in the assessment, that is, they have the flexibility to determine how their remote control will be. Each Department chooses certain quantitative indicators that are based on qualitative data, but in a more profound analysis, they are only quantitative.

Given that the Departments can choose the indicators by which they will be evaluated, there is the risk of a department disregard their real problems. For example, one of them may understand that their biggest problem is the evasion of undergraduate students. In an emancipatory view, this data would guide them to look for causes and adopt procedures to reduce evasion. In a policy that we named here as flexible control, the department may score this item with a lower weight, decreasing its importance in their set of actions. In this way, the problem is not solved. However, it will not jeopardize the Departmental score, since the department, in this assumption, chooses that the evasion matter has less weight.

All processes based on score, even if they do not have the intention to transform this evaluative practice in instruments of control and ranking, they end-up offering a rich material that allows this practice. In this way, despite the different evaluation criteria in several areas, it is possible to do what we have called here, a flexible ranking, that is, each department defines the indicators by which it will be ranked, unlike traditional rankings in which standards are defined externally.

Quantitative proposals adhere to the competition principle so boosted by neoliberal policies. Such a principle has been reaching teachers themselves, stimulating rivalry between educational institutions.

This ideology, instead of stimulating collaboration, reinforces competition and individualism, main causes of isolation in the classroom work.

In this scenario, both learning and quality were reduced to grades and indexes. As stated by Santomé (2003, p. 47) “[...] being competitive means to be more productive, more efficient, being able to present superior numbers and performances”. In this context, the otherness and sociability lose their importance.

Conceptual Trap

The first set of traps found in the discourse about assessment is the one with a conceptual nature, regarding those argumentative constructions that use key expressions, which are accepted as true by most people. About this Worthen, (1982, p. 07) points out that the conceptual clarity is an essential trace for any good evaluative plan, because, according to the author, “[...] if there is not a perfect understanding of the specific assessment that is being proposed [...] the rest of the evaluation runs a serious risk of being quite confusing.”

Conceptual traps imprison us to the idea that the assessments occur in a conceptual vacuum which has the pretention of being more and more neutral and objective, “[...] as if the assessment was free of values and interests” (Dias Sobrinho, 2008, p. 821), “[...] capable of determining in an absolutely objective way what is good or what is not” (Dias Sobrinho, 2004, p. 705). In Brazilian higher education, this tendency was accentuated in the second half of the 1990s with the institution of assessment as a regulatory policy (Barreyro; Rothen, 2008).

As a result of this trend, several problems of conceptual nature have arisen, which are related, among other factors, to the mistaken association of the controlled use, which may happen when using terminologies such as assessment, meritocracy, autonomy, responsibility, and accountability. Or yet when quality appears as a synonym of instrumental rationality and ends up promoting the overvaluation of quantitative indicators without bearing in mind the actors involved, the different educational contexts and other public policies intended for education.

In this way, the quality discourse has served to promote the elitism and meritocracy for teaching institutions, strengthening, inclusively, the exclusion. Thus, in order to detach ourselves from these conceptual traps and build an assessment that has an emancipatory potential, with strong critical-transforming bias (Saul, 2010), we must know what we are talking about, the *why* and *for whom* we speak. If our *why* is related to the construction of an evaluation system grounded on the emancipatory approach, some terms need to be revisited. This is what we have done in the following items when discussing assessment, autonomy, responsibility, accountability/ disclosure of results and meritocracy.

Assessment

Assessment is part of the human being life, and there is no way to understand university and education without evaluative practices, so education seems inconceivable without assessment. However, a few times we ask ourselves about the real meaning of the act of assessing. To assess, according to Vianna (1989, p. 41), is to determine the value of something for a certain purpose, it is the issuance of “[...] a judgment of value on the focused characteristic, being this value might be based, in part, but not exclusively, on quantitative data.”

Another recurrent conception is the idea that assesses is to measure the performance with the objective of identifying the success in learning. Still according to the same author, to measure “[...] is an operation of quantification, where numerical values are assigned, in accordance with pre-established criteria, to the characteristics of individuals, to establish how much they have of it” (Vianna, 1989, p. 41).

Luckesi (1998) understands that the assessment act encompasses the collection, analysis, and synthesis of data configuring the evaluation object, plus an assignment of value or quality, which is performed by comparing the configuration of the evaluated object with a certain standard of quality previously established for that type of object.

In this context, the assessment is similar to what Vianna (1989, p. 41) denominate as “[...] systematic or formal activities for the establishment of the value of educational phenomena [...]”, since it is foreseen by the authors an assignment of value or quality of what is intended to be assessed.

In more modern assessment conceptions, we have adopted a diagnostic approach and asked ourselves: what is the meaning of this student result? What are his/her difficulties and potentialities? In this conception, the assessment is seen as an important tool to aid learning, whose primary function is to help students to learn, especially when there are prevalent evaluation models based on classifications and an educational system that causes students to lose interest of the school, abandoning it due to constant disapprovals (Fernandes, 2009).

State practices of external evaluation are often comprehended as a competition between institutions. For this reason, although we use the same nomenclature *assessment*, we are dealing with instruments with different purposes (for what?). In the case of the external assessment, many times, the principle of evaluation has already been distorted.

A clear example of this distortion is the assessment performed by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (known as CAPES): if a program has 5 as score, it is better than a program four and worse than a program with a score of six; it does not take into account the significance of that postgraduation program in the institution and/or society, the advances that it has brought to the community, not soever the difficulties that led to such performance, it is an assessment purely quantitative and competitive. This is a concep-

tual trap, being necessary to evaluate the assessment itself considering that many times it has become a competitive assessment and not an educational one.

The analyzed proposal of planning and assessment (Unesp, 2017, p. 22), when dealing with the minimum criteria of teacher performance, propagates the idea of a continuous competition: “[...] no minimum or maximum standards are set for the choices made by teachers and researchers”, what “[...] reinforces the idea of a given ideal performance, which may not be executable for everyone, at the same rhythm and in the same way”, as well as it ends up generating competitions that prioritize more the quantity instead of the individual work quality of teachers and researchers.

In the assessment proposal, the comparison takes place through the “self-assessment” upon what was projected and effectively made by the Department, considering their teachers and researchers with their expertise, skills, and abilities”; the “progressive assessment” of the situation, “[...] at a moment and in the time-course, both ‘Departments’ as well as teachers and researchers”; the “internal compared assessment” “between departments and units, “[...] in accordance with large areas and knowledge fields”; and a “external compared assessment” between the university and other national and foreign universities, “[...] considering the mission of our university and its objectives” (Unesp, 2017, p. 14).

The discourse trap over the assessment presented in the analyzed document regards the criticizes made to the quantitative aspect present in the individual assessment spreadsheet of teacher performance portrayed in his/her evaluation model, which ends up promoting synchronic comparisons between “Units” and their “Departments” and diachronic between the quinquennium ending and the previous one, but not enough to be procedural. However, in proposing an assessment redefinition, it ends up retaking the competition idea by suggesting more flexible comparison mechanisms between teachers and researchers, large areas and knowledge areas, and between the institution and other national and foreign HEIs.

Autonomy

The second trap refers to the term autonomy, word of Greek origin “[...] composed by the radicals auto (which means own, peculiar) and nomia (which means law, rule), which designates the idea of self-direction” (Ribeiro, 2016 p. 107). The idea of autonomy appears linked to adulthood, which implies the ability to make decisions and, have self-control of one’s own practices.

In this way, the university autonomy allows it to act in society with different values than the adopted in social life, with knowledge that not necessarily are known by all. An example of this is the choice of topics to be investigated. A research about global warming or the Jewish genocide contributes to the improvement of our society in different ways, and both should have the right to happen. The university does not need

authorization for such research to happen, it has the ability to make decisions and draw its own paths.

The principle of autonomy is guaranteed by the Constitution of 1988 (Brazil, 1988), expressed in the article 207. Although, apparently, the term seems to be a reflex of a consensus, is not in its whole, since this autonomy should be exerted respecting the principle of ensuring quality standard, which appears in section VII of Article 206 of the same Constitution. It is regulated, therefore, by the quality, which can be measured in different ways in each society. It is possible to infer that, to create an assessment spreadsheet, the teaching institution is subordinating its own autonomy to this evaluative instrument.

All autonomy is relative, in this sense, Afonso (2007) affirms that the autonomy of educational institutions was more rhetoric than real and made possible the discourse that justifies the assessment as a means to control the quality and accountability of the actors involved.

To Afonso (2009), this increase of control is accompanied by the autonomy loss, in a scenario in which universities are building evaluation mechanisms that facilitate its control both external and internal. The very National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Brazil, 1996) affirms in its 67 article, the need for a performance assessment of education professionals that may have functional progression; by creating an assessment spreadsheet, even if this is not the first intention, it can result in an assessment of servants and interfere, in the long-term, in their functional progression: autonomy subordinate itself to assessment.

The justification for the creation of assessment tools has been the increase of economic competitiveness, State efficiency and the improvement of teaching quality. This quality discourse, as analyzes Afonso (2007, p. 18), shows itself seductive because it reduces quality in a score obtained in an assessment, commonly quantitative “[...] without taking into account the educational policies, individuals, and the respective processes and educational contexts”.

A common trap is an extension in the number of assessments. We see this in the proposal analyzed by mentioning the number of assessments performed by the institution, as follows:

Finally, another affirmation stimulated, equally, the elaboration of a new proposal: the graduation and post-graduation are already planned and evaluated by the respective coordination, council and agencies and/or organisms and institutions outer than Unesp, lacking, for the ‘DEPARTMENTS’, the process that stimulates the actions of planning, self-assessment, and assessment (Unesp, 2017, p. 06).

In this way, the evaluation starts to reach also the Departments, creating an assessment culture and sticking to what Afonso calls of “assessment obsession”. These evaluations are revested by a pseudo-neutrality and, therefore, legitimize and justify the hierarchy of in-

dividuals who start to internalize the rules of our unequal society and, take responsibility for their own performance.

The autonomy has been called into question, and the teacher will dedicate himself to what is best ranked by the Department. The fact that these indicators are scored in a flexible way, in accordance with the specificities of each area, does not mean that they should not be respected. It is, therefore, a flexible autonomy. The very own document mentions that this autonomy is conditioned to different factors:

1. Autonomy:

- a) of the 'DEPARTMENTS', basic cells where the academic life is realized;
- b) of the 'UNITS', according to their profiles;
- c) of the university, as responsible for the conduction of its institutional project;
- d) of their teachers and researchers, if it is practiced in consonance with the plan of work of the different Unesp instances (Unesp, 2017, p. 14).

In this case, autonomy is relative, because there is a spreadsheet that attaches different values to certain activities. The maximum score in the spreadsheet would be an indication of quality and, to achieve it, the attendant must fulfill the items that integrate the spreadsheet. In this sense, the autonomy was relativized.

In the analyzed proposal, the item *Education and Research of undergraduate and post-graduate* is a mandatory variable, while the participation in extension projects is an optional variable. Such differentiation allows us to infer that these activities are valued in different ways within the university.

The spreadsheet construction itself is a trap that consists in believing that it is possible to create an instrument capable of "[...] homogenize the planning and provide a comparison" (Unesp, 2017, p. 31). Creating variables that seek to "assess" the teacher and researcher work without interfering in their autonomy.

The fact that the construction of this instrument being collective does not prevent that the proposal becomes one more instrument of control. An example of this is the existence of invariant weights for some activities, "[...] the mandatory variables cannot be altered" (Unesp, 2017, p. 30), these are common to all departments and must represent at least 60% of the score (Unesp, 2017, p. 26). The variable part of the spreadsheet has a lower weight: 40%. It was built, therefore, a relative autonomy, since the differentiated part has a smaller value.

The spreadsheet itself stipulates to the teacher/researcher to have intellectual production in the area of teaching, research and extension. That which would be a natural product of the teachers work started to be imposed because he/she must produce in all three areas. As a result, it is possible to affirm that the proposal presented is fully in line with the actual legislation and, with what many authors state about productivity. Therefore, the teacher will be *assessed* in all manners, once the

criteria of CAPES were incorporated into the spreadsheet and will affect as well those who are not in the postgraduation: “The classification Qualis CAPES could be adopted, establishing the classification B2 as the minimum standard” (Unesp, 2017, p. 37).

The creation of the spreadsheet itself is a trap since it will press even more the teacher. With this, the institution eventually ended up incorporating the criteria that it criticizes so much in external assessment by formulating a device of self-control. Therefore, the teacher will have autonomy, provided that achieving a good score in the spreadsheet.

Responsibility

The responsibility with the scientific and social development is part of the nature and of public function of every university, as states Dias Sobrinho (2015, p. 583) by emphasizing that “[...] the responsibility axis of educational institutions must consist essentially in training individuals-citizens gifted with civic values and technical knowledge scientifically relevant and socially pertinent.” It is about a responsibility that goes beyond the technique but carries a strong ethical and political bias.

Hardly anyone would defend that the university or its researchers should not act with responsibility, in a way that to defend the responsibility of educational institutions and of those involved in it, is something unanimous. The teacher, when preparing a class, must choose good bibliography, the best authors, bring the best questions, know the learning difficulties of students’, in short, comprehend the level differences of students, not giving the same class for the postgraduate student and the one at the first year of graduation, always considering all these differences. “[...] the knowledge with the highest possible standard of academic, scientific, technical, moral, political and social quality” (Dias Sobrinho, 2015, p. 583).

It is undeniable the responsibility of educators for the learning of their students. For its turn, in state policies, the responsibility is comprehended as the blaming of teachers. Thus, if the student is not learning properly or if he is dropping-out, it is the teachers’ guilt. In this sense, responsibility is often confused with responsabilization of teachers by the low quality of education and the educational responsibility transform itself into an uncritical stance of blaming the teacher.

The question of blaming the teacher in the face of the school failure is pointed by Freitas (2012, p. 346) as a “new approach” for public policies of education bringing with themselves the concepts of responsabilization, meritocracy, and privatization,

[...] where the responsabilization for results (read: increase of the average in national and international tests) is legitimized by meritocracy (distinctions or sanctions provided with bases on the merit of having increased or not the ave-

rage) with the purpose of developing new ways of public privatisation (which is demoralized by the meritocracy of higher averages), aiming at the establishment of a 'space' that settles itself progressively as 'non-state public' in contraposition to the 'state public'.

Afonso (2018, p. 12) emphasizes that it would be more appropriate to designate such accountability policies as scapegoating policies as they bring an approach clearly exclusionary and negative of responsabilization, assigning "[...] predominantly the academic failure to schools and teachers." The author also mentions that these policies "[...] devalue or undervalue the explanation of the various factors that weigh on institutional contexts, and the action of educational actors" (Afonso, 2018, p. 13). Freitas (2016, p. 222) points out that,

[...] there is no responsabilization of the system to the conditions of life offered, to the founding conditions to facilitate the learning processes and this whole evasion of conditions is hidden in a process that converts social inequalities into academic inequalities [...].

In this perspective, the sense of responsibility, besides demoralizing the teacher's work, restricts the public aspirations of the assessment to the control, to the verification of the efficiency and to the productivity in accordance with external parameters. We have as an example the academic productivism trap that transforms science itself into a trade currency. It is the famous *publish or perish*, where a researcher becomes important by publishing in high-impact journals, A1 or A2, and no longer by the performed research, the quality of the classes given, or the good orientation given to students. The publication became a trade currency, if the researcher does not research, he will have less value.

The proposal of assessment analyzed (Unesp, 2017, p. 07-08) emphasizes that "[...] the institutional assessment ceases to be made only by the committee responsible for it [System of Institutional Evaluation] known as AVISNT and becomes responsibility of all, running through different plans of the university life", in a horizontal perspective that considers "[...] the inseparability between the university purposes - teaching, research, and extension, as well as management, understood as a means to achieve them."

The idea is to enable a dialectical movement between teachers, researchers, departments and their instances of articulation and management. But care must be taken so that this responsibility change by conducting the assessment process is not just a transfer of the blame from the teacher to the department, in a way that increasing those responsible for the assessment does not mean reviewing the role of responsabilization.

As we have seen "[...] the university justifies its existence by the fulfillment of its social responsibilities" (Dias Sobrinho, 2015, p. 583). However, this responsibility becomes a trap, in the measure that it is summarized on blaming the teacher for the failure of students, when

overvalue the academic productivity of research in detriment to other existing activities at the university and even when seeking to decentralize the responsible for the evaluative process with the pretense that everyone feels responsible for the institutional assessment.

In this scenario, what we have is the demoralization of teachers' work through scapegoating, the obligation of results through quantitative goals and the apparent involvement of all as responsible for the evaluative doing.

Accountability

The university has to be accountable to the society, once it exercises a public activity, with strong social effects. According to Afonso (2009, p. 14), the accountability is the "[...] act of justification and explanation of what is done, how it is done and why it is done."

In this process of searching the transparency principle fulfillment, that is done through the ethical requirement of accountability to society, it was developed the idea of assessment need (Dias Sobrinho; Balzan, 1995). Thus, the assessment ended up gaining space as an accountability mechanism, in so far as it highlights the results of the institution actions, showing to society how the university is structured, how it produces knowledge and what is the meaning of the science produced.

The proposal of assessment analyzed also considers that being the university an institution "[...] free and public, maintained by the State and, consequently by Society" (Unesp, 2017, p. 12), must always do the provision of accounts responding to the social, economic, political and cultural demands; in addition, explain how public resources destined to the institution result in efficiency and effectiveness; how it responds to the questions of scientific, philosophical and artistic nature both made by the Institution and by the society; and answer if it addresses the functions that are peculiar to the institutional mission, "[...] without ceasing to contribute to solve problems that are related to other institutions and spheres of the contemporary world" (Unesp, 2017, p. 12).

Furthermore, regarding the appearance of the assessment in this process, Afonso (2009, p. 15) highlights that it precedes (or may precede) the rendering of accounts, and that, for this same reason, is essential the development of "[...] processes based on reliable methodologies, valid and trustworthy, that allow to issue and substantiate valuable judgments about practices, institutions, contexts, and policies", otherwise, the accountability ways are harmed, simply reducing themselves "[...] to an accountability that is symbolic or ritualistic".

What is intended as accountability, is the transparency principle of activities developed inside the universities. In the assessment proposal analyzed (Unesp, 2017, p. 14), the transparency principle aims to favor the diffusion of information within the university itself; the disclosure of this information to the society; the integration of information

into a system of diagnosis and prospecting; and the verification of the relationship between the planning and execution.

The trap existing at this point is to comprehend the accountability only as an obligation of results, such as a quantitative goal to be reached, and usually, the obligation of results leads to practices of punishment and exclusion. In this sense, the accountability, that is a value, becomes something negative for the education, because it ceases to consider the transparency principle to focus only on the results control.

Evaluate the university, in the sense of accountability, becomes an instrument of control from a flexible distance, that is, it becomes the watchman of institutional activities, while the punishment, in general, works much more as a threat. The weight of punishment makes people behave as if they were in a panopticon, whose structure facilitates the prisoner control, that does not know whether it is being watched or not (Foucault, 1999). A similar situation occurs in the remote controls, there is no physical presence of the evaluator, but who is assessed has the feeling of being constantly monitored.

Meritocracy

Even the equality defenders comprehend that the university has meritocratic dynamics. Meritocracy in the university is linked, mainly, to the scientific authority. For example, in the university, meritocracy is institutionalized when conferring the doctor's degree, recognizing a person as having scientific merits and therefore can-do science.

The meritocracy discourse turns itself into a trap when it leads to productivism, that is, it ceases of being merit generate relevant knowledge to society, toward being, the number of published papers, financing obtained, etc. As pointed out by Barbosa (1996), meritocracy is intimately linked to a social order of ability and effort recognition. The meritocracy ideology is linked to the assessment of performance and productivity with the goal of choosing the best ones.

Commonly in the scenario of Brazilian postgraduation, meritocracy appears linked to publication, in a way that, publishing more papers/research and in magazines high scored, reinforces a positive image of this teacher/researcher towards the department, program and the institution itself.

In the document are inserted as mandatory indicators some items that are directly related to the merit recognition, such as the accreditation in post-graduate programs recognized by CAPES, coordination of projects financed by development agencies, scholarships of teaching and research, and the publication of scientific papers.

The valorization of these merit indicators becomes a trap when the document foresees the quantification of these, requiring that the Departments present goals/productions to be achieved in the short-term. With this, the proposal tends to stimulate the academic productivism. It is worth mentioning that the proposal foresees publications into three spheres of activity: teaching, research, and extension. In this

way, there has been an increase in the demand, and the teacher should publish more every time. The graduation is then, ruled by productivist dynamics, likewise the post-graduation.

Statistical Trap

Everyone who works with empirical data knows that information needs to be tabulated and that statistic tells us a lot, however, the big problem of statistics dwells in its association with a factory production that makes us crave numbers and indexes without the concern on how to generate them. This idea is closely linked to the productivism.

To Bortoni Ricardo (2008), there is a valorization/fixation by the positivism and this has influenced both academic research and common sense; the valorization of numerical data is a reflection of this scientific tradition. Statistical data may be used as a proof element on a particular thesis, once apparently, they are irrefutable and neutral. However, this is not entirely true, since they bring a partial vision of reality and, therefore, may be manipulated.

Chaparro (2003, n/p) states that “[...] statistic itself, never promises truths; only reveals or produces presumptions (something that can be believed), from encoded numerical data”. It is possible to assert that it only reveals a part of what can be measured of a specific reality allowing us to sustain that overvaluing these data implies on leaving aside the other half of reality. More than this, for the journalism professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), these data can be used to distort certain realities, therefore it is necessary to take into account the intentions of those who make use of this argument.

Afonso (2007) highlights as well the importance attributed to quantitative data in assessments. For the author, the assessment centrality as a control mechanism represented a retreat for public policies, because it overvalued quantitative aspects in the assessments. The analyzed proposal reflects this trend and presents a strong positivist bias considering that the use of high-level statistical data presents an important weight in the construction of this discourse since the technical justification appears as something neutral and unquestionable. In it, the quantitative bias is highly valued, frequently being found estimations of the following type: “[...] variables, weights, indicators, and goals, outlined at the beginning of the biennium” (Unesp, 2017, p. 20).

Every calculation presented, even if this is not the purpose, leads to the construction of an index, that, despite bringing global information, does not present elements that are relevant to aid the pedagogical practice. This happens in the analyzed proposal when mentioning that “[...] to ensure the equity and comparison, the weights assigned to the mandatory variables should comprise, at least, 60% of the 100 total points; and to the optional variables, at maximum, it should be assigned 40%” (Unesp, 2017, p. 26). It is a flexible process, because every department, each unit, will be able to communicate how they want to be controlled, however, they will be controlled.

In addition, the outcome of the entire statistical calculation leads to the production of simple indicators, that is, a number that should represent the performance of certain professional or institution, because there is obligatoriness in the document to establish the weights of each activity as 40%, 30% and 20% of one indicator. As it is not possible to act in every University or Department problem, it is necessary to make choices, but these choices will be “controlled” remembering that “[...] the mandatory variables cannot be altered” (Unesp, 2017, p. 30). In practice, the control was increased, and the autonomy decreased.

Both in the accountability model based on the market logic, and in the model that relies on the administrative control, are preferred forms of evaluation predominantly quantitative, such as those used in objective or standardized tests, which facilitate the measurement and allow the comparison of academic results (Afonso, 2009, p. 46).

The use of statistical data coming out of external assessments is not neutral. The presentation of statistics data induces the creation of a reality. Many times, an evaluation process starts without the definition of which reality it wants to build, in other words, *what for?* and *for whom?* Without this basis, we are in danger of building evaluation systems that are not contributing to the quality of graduation, but rather to the precariousness of the teacher’s work and to the devaluation of education. In the control policies, the erroneous use of statistical data causes another trap, the trap of continuous progress.

Trap of Continuous Progress

In the analyzed document, there is the idea that a continuous improvement of teaching performance is necessary and that it should be measured by indexes. In Brazil, this idea is presented for the first time in the creation of the Basic Education Development Index (known as IDEB). At a national level, some states, such as São Paulo, also created its own index, such as the Education Development Index of the State of São Paulo (known as IDESP).

In the IDEB proposal, presented by Fernandes (2007), the author, when performing a statistical study using the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), identifies that the countries that are members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) have an IDEB equivalent to 6. Based on this survey, it was proposed that all countries should seek a gradual and continuous growth so that in 2024 they could reach such index. In order for the final goal 6 to be achieved, were created intermediate and gradual goals, indicating to educational institutions the need for a constant performance increase in their evaluation processes.

On the Unesp proposal, it is assumed the idea currently defended by the IDEB/IDESP of the need to create an index that permits the proposition of improvement goals, by pressing teachers and the Departments to have a continuous increase in their score. The proposal forese-

es that “[...] each ‘DEPARTMENT’, as well as each teacher or researcher, considering the variables and indicators, expressed by weights, should establish their goal plans” (Unesp, 2017, p. 29).

This trap involves the use of statistical data as a way to evidence a possible gradation/crescent improvement of the performance of those involved. In fact, both the IDEB as the IDESP are grounded on a simple index, a number. To believe that a single number can be considered a perfect description of the Brazilian educational reality is a trap.

Fernandes (one of the IDEB idealizers) and Gremaud (2009, p. 09) admit that “[...] all measures used in educational assessments are imperfect, because they do not take into account all aspects that have to be considered and, by measuring with errors (systematic and/or random) the aspects that they propose to evaluate”. By adopting the same strategy, the proposal falls into the same trap, creates an index incapable of contemplating all the activities performed by the university teachers.

Another mistake associated with this same strategy is the idea that it is possible to continuously have an improvement, that improving continuously is extremely necessary. However, sometimes this is not possible or necessary. A department which has good results in their student’s learning does not need to have a continuous improvement in the pedagogical practices aiming for better results. In this case, the appropriate is to seek practices that maintain the current performance.

The same reasoning applies to the quantitative increase in scientific production. Departments that are national and international references in their field do not necessarily need to improve but keep the levels in which they are. This constant search for a better result is based on the internalization of competitiveness and productivity ideas, principles closely linked to neoliberal policies.

It is worth mentioning that the elaboration of goals is not enough for them to be achieved, the same goes for the objectives designated by the university. According to Fernandes (2007, p. 05, our emphasis) “[...] the quality evolution is related to the exposure time of generations to the new system and to changes in the focus of educational policy “. Therefore, changes in public policies that govern education are necessary. If the goal is for the teacher to publish more, once this is highly scored, it is necessary for him/her to have more time to dedicate to research. Therefore, if public policies reduce the hiring of teachers for higher education, this goal will not be reached.

The creation of these indexes tied to goals reinforces the assessment technology and equips the positivist methodology of educational income quantification; the productivity indexes and the evaluation criteria are determined by economic values of profitability and competitiveness. An assessment created in these molds will be much more geared towards the market interests, for-profit, and competitiveness instead of for the values concerning the development and improvement of mankind (Dias Sobrinho, 2002).

Final Considerations

The paper specifies the dynamics of what we have named as traps present in the assessment proposals of higher education institutions. In the assessment proposal analyzed, as in others, the trap can be perceived by the compliments that it could receive. The principles that underpin it might be considered very good by a defender with an emancipatory view of the assessment, who by reading it, would applaud. On the other hand, a defender with a managerial and control view, by reading the proposal operationalization, would applaud it, as well. The problem is that such visions are not articulated, there is a juxtaposition between opposites, there is no organicity between the *what for?*, *for whom?*, *what* and *how?*

Mechanisms developed having the control as a *what for?*, tend to produce a unique index that facilitates the ranking, even if this the intention is not that. It would be like putting a loaded gun to hold a stack of paper; it can be said that it will not be used nevertheless, it is there, intimidating the members of the academic community. In order to avoid falling into this trap, one must be very clear about the articulation between *what for?*, *for whom?*, *what* and *how?* of the instrument: promote the self-assessment of teachers and the reflection on the paths followed is a good starting point.

The concept of assessment is presented with a *what for* linked to the idea of diagnosis of the educational process, however, the proposal assumes an assessment view as a measure (*how*) and as a process of competition between Teachers and Departments. The recipient of the assessment, for whom, became mainly the market and not the academic community (students, teachers, leaders, and the community involved), that is, the concept of autonomy is distorted of its comprehension as preponderant, restricting itself to the self-control to meet external demands. The rightful provision of accounts and, the institutional responsibility become the scapegoat by the results not achieved.

Data from quantitative analyzes present in statistics can be tools for understanding the academic dynamics. However, the supposed neutrality of statistics consists in a trap to the extent that it sidesteps essential discussions such as: the *what for* of the institution, *for whom* the work of the university is intended, the *what* effectively it must offer to society and *how* their practices should be.

The needed search of constant improvement of institutional practices, when interpreted in the light of the creation of indices, leads to the trap that a continuous improvement is possible and, to summarize the *how* to the simple formulation of objectives would lead to virtuous practices. It is not in question the institutional conditions (*how*) nor it is recognized that in many cases it is only necessary to maintain the current practice (*how*) in order for the institution to achieve its *why*.

Having as the recipient (*for whom*) the academic community, it is possible that the assessment has as the object (*what*) the meaning of the institutional work. Indicating their gaps, the positive points would be

maintained, and the actions could be proposed aiming to remedy those aspects that are less developed. For instance, it might be that the lack of dissemination of research results is an area that needs improvement. In this case, teachers could work collectively to increase their amount of publications. If this *who* (what) to be assessed is a collective individual, the pressure and competition tend to be minimized, and collaboration among teachers encouraged.

The way this process will be done is another matter of extreme importance. A first aspect would be to collectively list the items that have to be evaluated and refusing to only quantify them, avoiding turning it into weightings that allow a unique index and, consequently, a ranking. To create qualitative elements is not an easy task, but it is essential, aiming to build a fairer instrument, one that disseminates values other than competition and exclusion.

When an individual is placed in a zone of discomfort, tortured by a scoring system that rules his every action, a moment comes when the individuals involved adapt themselves and learn to survive and, begin to conduct their institutional practices as the market production of scientific papers allows and demands.

Recognizing the traps that permeate the assessment universe is not such a simple task, one must be attentive and carry out a constant evaluation of the assessment instrument itself, taking into consideration the *what for?*, the *for whom?*, the *what?* and the *how?* of such instrument. Without this constant analysis, we can fall into the trap of over-valuing the indexes and, increase the control over the teachers' work.

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