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Tensiones entre la docencia y la investigación: el papel de la reflexividad en la agencia académica del profesorado de universidades chilenas

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Summary

Academic work mainly involves teaching, conducting research, undertaking academic management responsibilities, and participating in outreach activities. This variety of tasks and their delicate balance make it important to investigate how academicians understand, organise, and execute these activities within the context of increasing managerialism in higher education.

The connection between teaching and research in academia has often sparked debate, highlighting the complexities and controversies surrounding these two essential activities. In discourse, both activities are understood to have a robust and enduring connection. However, systematic and long-term studies have provided little empirical evidence to support this close alliance. Despite this, the lack of problematisation has elevated the link to an unquestionable, timeless truth, closer to an enduring myth than to a dynamic and variable construction. This generates inconsistencies that strain academic work, given the expectations that arise around it and the diverse ways it is configured in practice.

Given the discrepancies that have arisen, it is worth asking: how valid and possible is the link between teaching and research under the current conditions in which academic work is conducted? In theory, teaching and research operate on the same level, supported by the *Humboldtian ideal* at the heart of the American research university model. However, in practice, this model faces the contradiction that research has become the primary activity of contemporary academic work, eclipsing teaching. This difference has tended to inhibit, restrict, or strain the possibilities for linking the two activities.

This study explores how faculty members at three Chilean universities engage in their teaching and research activities, as well as the relationship between these two aspects of their academic work concerning the enabling and limiting factors in their working environment. To address this, two main research questions were posed: What structural and sociocultural factors influence the teaching and research activities of faculty members at Chilean universities? How does reflexivity mediate the interaction between academic agency and the contextual factors that affect the development of teaching and research?

The research was conducted using a multiple case study approach. Faculty members were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variability. Empirical data were collected through 40 semi-structured interviews. Finally, a hybrid thematic analysis was performed.

This book is organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework that underpins this study, while Chapter 2 delves into the historical context of the relationship between teaching and research. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the empirical findings gathered from each of the three universities examined.

Chapter 1 analyses the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used as interpretive lenses in this study. To do so, it first addresses the core aspects of realist social theory and reflexivity theory proposed by Margaret Archer. In addition to this, it also addresses the subject-centred sociocultural approach.

Archer's realist social theory is based on critical realism, which postulates the existence of a reality independent of human experience. At the same time, she criticises theoretical positions that attribute the causality of behaviour to solely structural conditions or exclusively internal motivations. According to this theory, structural and cultural conditions exist before agency can maintain or change them.

Meanwhile, agency, referring to the domain of human action and interaction, involves the subjectivity, stance, and intentionality of individuals in response to contextual conditions. The latter influence the exercise of agency through their enabling or restricting powers.

For its part, reflexivity lies at the heart of Archer's account of agency. Reflexivity is the causal power of agency and mediates between agency, structure, and culture. The relationship between structure, culture, and agency is not a conditioning process where context determines agency, but rather an interaction mediated by the reflexive response that agents use to act on their life projects. Whether contextual enabling and constraints are activated or not depends on agential reflexive deliberation.

Reflexivity arises in the interaction between people's emerging concerns or worries (the most important things they care about) and the context. In this sense, reflexivity, while common to all people, is characterised by its variability. That is, it leads those in a similar position in the social structure to practice agency differently. Archer identifies four modes of reflexivity: communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexive, and fractured. The first three are active in the face of change. The last, on the other hand, is characterised by an inability to take an active stance on personal concerns, which impedes the ability to act purposefully.

In turn, reflexivity theory proposes a model of reflexive mediation that includes three stages. The first stage analyses the structural and sociocultural factors that objectively impact the situations agents face, through their enabling and restraining powers. The second examines the fundamental concerns or worries that agents subjectively define. And the third accounts for the courses of action that arise through agents' reflexive deliberations. This model has been used as the basis for the analysis of the empirical results presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Additionally, a subject-centred sociocultural approach was adopted to delve deeper into the different manifestations of agency exercised by faculty members in their teaching and research activities. From this perspective, agency is practiced when influence is exercised, decisions are made, and positions are adopted that affect work and personal identity. Strong agency is exercised in meaningful work practices, while weak agency arises from a lack of opportunities to do so. Progressive agency, on the other hand, is exercised through an active and innovative commitment to change. This is in contrast to reserved agency, which manifests itself in positions of resistance and opposition. In the negotiation of professional identity, maintainable agency emerges when there is a refusal to exercise the socially expected identity. Transformative agency, on the other hand, manifests itself by breaking with traditional practices and taking the initiative to transform them. Finally, agency is also exercised collectively. Relational agency aligns collective interests to respond to common problems, while corporate agency articulates shared interests to influence corporate decisions.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the evolution of the link between teaching and research from a historical and comparative perspective. To this end, it first analyses the conceptualisation of this link according to different university models. Secondly, it explores the link between teaching and research based on available empirical evidence. Finally, it offers a comparative analysis of how academic work has evolved both globally and in Chile in particular.

This chapter presents the main results of the long-standing, systematic study of this bond. These results focused primarily on verifying its existence, revealing that when the bond exists, it becomes fragile and unstable, while when it does not, it requires a considerable investment of time and nurturing.

Subsequent studies sought to investigate the factors that influence the potential for links between teaching and research. Their results reported that global phenomena, such as the growing adoption of managerialist measures in higher education based on competition for rankings, prestige, and funding, strain the ways in which both activities relate. Furthermore, they found that the influence of these factors varies according to the disciplines and the personal characteristics of the faculty, including their stage in their academic careers. Similarly, it has been pointed out that factors that in certain contexts enhance the link, in others, limit it.

Recent studies have focused on the agency of teachers. This line of research is particularly relevant to this study, which sought to investigate how Chilean teachers organise their teaching and research activities in a highly privatised and segmented context. This context, in turn, has been characterised by a long tradition of teaching and the increasing adoption of managerialist measures.

Chapter 3 presents empirical results obtained in the context of a Chilean public university with research and doctoral programmes in selective areas. These results indicate that institutional constraints stemming from a broad regulatory framework that establishes teaching as mandatory and research as optional enable their development. Meanwhile, teaching and research policies and strategies, established separately and with disparate incentives, restrict the possibilities for linking the two activities. Meanwhile, the introduction of academic evaluation mechanisms that, on the one hand, privilege research and, on the other, increase control over teaching, contradict the broader regulatory framework and act as a constraint on the development of academic ties and agency.

The link between teaching and research is expressed differently in local contexts. In Social Sciences and Humanities, both activities are assumed to be unavoidable in academic work, developed separately at the undergraduate level due to curricular limitations. Meanwhile, at the graduate level, research informs teaching. In Health Sciences, the focus is on teaching, while research is voluntary. Limitations to the development of this link are the tradition of undergraduate professional training, the lack of postgraduate programmes, a limited academic body, and an academic management focused on control. In Basic Sciences and Engineering, the emphasis has been on research, although in practice, there is a separation between teaching and research, which affects the segmentation of the academic body.

Regarding the modes of reflexivity, the faculty at this university assumes the following as dominant modes: the autonomous mode of reflexivity and the meta-reflexive mode. Communicative and fractured modes were not identified, which is consistent across all three universities.

Faculty members who share the autonomous mode of reflexivity tend to align contextual constraints with their core concerns. Therefore, they leverage the enabling mechanisms for achieving their academic projects and tend to circumvent limitations when these are recognised. Most recognise research as their core concern; therefore, they take advantage of contextual opportunities to develop their research agenda without limitations, which strengthens their sense of agency. Similarly, some recognise academic management as their core concern, which they have developed through leadership positions aligned with research or teaching. This is a distinctive aspect among those who share this mode of reflexivity, and it refers to the integration of concerns. This coupling consists of aligning secondary concerns with the core concern so as to prevent them from entering into conflict or tension and hindering the achievement of vital academic projects.

Meanwhile, faculty members who share the meta-reflective mode come into conflict with contextual constraints, activating limitations and ignoring authorisations, given that their actions are based on a value-based logic. Most identify teaching and research as plural concerns, seeking integration between the two based on their ideals. This activates restrictions in a context that encourages the separate development of teaching and research with a system of disparate rewards.

Chapter 4 presents empirical results obtained in the context of a traditional private university with a public commitment, offering research and doctoral programmes in all its areas. The results demonstrate that institutional constraints stem from a broad regulatory framework based on the imperative that faculty teach what they research, and the existence of complementary standards defined collegially and with disciplinary relevance in local spaces, in addition to an incentive policy based on academic qualifications, enable the development of teaching and research. However, teaching and research policies developed separately, as well as the increasing pressures for competitive research, restrict the possibilities for linking the two activities. In local spaces, on the other hand, there are few expressions of linkages between the two activities, and those that do exist are sustained by the faculty's agency.

In local areas, despite the positive assessment of the existence of complementary regulations, these reflect, to a greater or lesser extent, the increased demands on research and tend to prioritise research over teaching. This restricts the possibilities for linking the two activities. In the Social Sciences and Humanities, there is a clear segmentation of the academic community due to the differentiation of academic units and the curricular tensions between professional and disciplinary training, which limit their connection. When this occurs at the initiative of the faculty, research informs graduate teaching. In Health Sciences, additional limitations include managerial style based on control and conflicts between peers over the separate development of teaching and research, which favours the latter. When such a link exists, it is also due to the faculty's agency, where research informs teaching and through research initiatives in teaching.

Meanwhile, in Basic Sciences and Engineering, a marked separation between teaching and research is identified, favouring the broad and competitive development of research.

The manifestations of academic agency are varied. In general, faculty members from the three areas of knowledge collectively exercise corporate agency through the definition and implementation of complementary standards with disciplinary relevance. In particular, faculty members who share the autonomous reflexivity mode exercise strong agency in research aligned with contextual conditions and sustainable agency in teaching as a secondary activity. Meanwhile, faculty members who share the meta-reflexive mode exercise strong agency depending on their plural concerns. In Health Sciences in particular, faculty members exercise transformative agency focused on strengthening the bond. This is achieved through research in teaching and in research-informed undergraduate teaching. All of this challenges the local context focused on the separate development of both activities.

Chapter 5 presents the empirical results obtained at a traditional private university with a public commitment to emerging research. Institutional constraints reflect centralised management with policies and mechanisms that regulate teaching and research. This enables their separate development, despite varying responses across faculties. Similarly, the recent reorganisation of faculties through the establishment of a departmental organisation seeks to emulate those with the highest academic productivity. Similarly, the segmentation of academic staff into research and teaching options restricts the development of this link. Meanwhile, the institutional strategy promoted to increase research through a set of mechanisms aimed at faculty who primarily teach has enabled the development of this link.

Locally, in all three areas of knowledge, faculty focused on developing teaching as their sole or primary activity have begun to conduct research in teaching with successful results. This has led to improved teaching through research. In Social Sciences and Humanities in particular, limitations such as departmental organisation that has emphasised research, local management focused on meeting benchmarks, academic segmentation, and gaps in the development of research and academic writing skills restrict the development of the link between teaching and research. Moreover, peer collaboration for the development of research in teaching and local leadership focused on agency development act as enablers for its development. Meanwhile, in Health Sciences, the emphasis on undergraduate teaching, with a predominantly teaching-oriented faculty, and weak departmental organisation and local leadership restrict the development of this link. In Basic Sciences and Engineering, the promotion of separate teaching and research and the segmentation of the academic body act as constraints on the development of the link.

Teachers who share the autonomous approach present diverse fundamental concerns that are strategically aligned with institutional and local constraints. Meanwhile, teachers who share the reflective approach present plural concerns with a critical perspective on the institutional and local context.

In short, the results of this study indicate that tensions between teaching and research have intensified due to structural factors such as increased pressures for more research and accountability. These contextual influences affect the three universities differently, given their

underlying conditions derived from the high stratification and segmentation of the Chilean university system. For their part, the three universities have responded to the demand for more research by developing teaching and research separately, which has favoured research and relegated teaching to a secondary role.

All three universities have prioritised research over teaching, despite contextual limitations such as the composition of the academic staff, lack of funding, and the long tradition of teaching at Chilean universities. However, they share a belief in the link between teaching and research, even though none of them has a systematic policy or institutional mechanisms to implement this.

For their part, sociocultural factors originating from local spaces (faculty, department, or school) enable or restrict the possibilities for developing the link between teaching and research. This influence varies depending on whether the local organisational culture is based on collegiality or competition, or whether the emphasis is on professional or disciplinary training. This highlights that the link between both activities is sustained by the power of reflexivity, giving rise to different agentic manifestations.

Faculty organise teaching and research according to their modes of reflexivity. Meta-reflexive faculty tend to place teaching and research at the same level of priority as part of their plural concerns. These faculty also recognise that institutional policies strain the possibilities of linking the two activities. Meanwhile, autonomously reflective faculty, while recognising the tensions between teaching and research arising from contextual conditions, tend to avoid them, while activating the contextual enablers that allow them to pursue their vital academic projects.

This study is a pioneer in Chile in addressing the link between teaching and research from a reflexive agential perspective in interaction with the context. It sought to overcome the reductionism of some research focused solely on the pedagogical aspects of the link between teaching and research, as well as those studies aimed at determining the factors and their influence on the relationship between both activities. In this study, the emphasis was not on the agency of faculty or on contextual influence in isolation, but rather on the interaction between the two and the reflexive mediation in the development of teaching and research activities in a context of growing managerialism in higher education.

This study contributes to academic development policies by placing agentic reflexivity at the centre of academic work. Therefore, the incorporation of initiatives that harmonise the development of diverse and flexible academic careers with the requirements of institutional policies and local cultures is crucial for strengthening agency among the faculty staff.