Systematisation of experience: theory and practice

Cordero, D. B., & Torres Carrillo, A. (2017). *La Sistematización como investigación interpretativa crítica.* Bogotá: Editorial El Búho.

Carolina Schenatto da Rosa

Systematisation of experience is widely known and discussed in Latin America, and in other parts of the world. However, what does it mean? What is systematisation of experience? Is it a scientific method? Is it a methodology? Who can do it and why? Is it focused on social workers or on theory? Is systematisation of experience related to critical theory and, at the same time, based on the experience of their performers? What is the relation between theory and practices? What is the relation between systematisation of experience, popular education and participatory research? The answers for these and other questions are addressed in *La Sistematización como investigación interpretativa crítica*[1], written by Alfonso Torres Carrillo and Disney Barragán Cordero.

Both authors are acknowledged researchers, who have contributed to the epistemological and methodological foundations of systematisation from a critical approach. They are professors and researchers at the National Pedagogical University of Colombia, working with popular education processes, social movements, and participatory action research (PAR). They also offer courses about systematisation, yielding new scientific and social knowledge and perspectives from the global South. More than merely introduce systematisation of experience as a concept and a methodology, the book is, in itself, the systematisation of their experiences as researchers and educators, presenting how they understand and schematise systematisation of experience in the last 25 years.

The book is organised in four sections. In the first part, *Emergencia, trayectoria y sentidos de la sistematización*[2]*,* the authors give us a historical overview of the Latin American context, demonstrating how and when systematisation of experience started to be used as a method of scientific investigation. Highlighting the inherent relationship between popular education, PAR and systematisation, Torres & Cordero emphasise the ethical and political commitment that these fields had with the emancipatory perspective to social transformation (Torres 2010).

In the 70s, with the emergence of popular movements and organisations that questioned the imperialist and colonialist character of capitalism in Latin America, the popular culture intensified. This created a breeding ground for the development of different proposals as theology of liberation, philosophy of liberation, and the popular education movement, that

---

1   Systematisation as critical interpretive research.
2   Emergence, trajectory and meanings of systematisation

resonates in universities. It is from these social, political, educational, ecclesial, communicative, investigative, intellectual and cultural fields that the necessity of co-producing systematic knowledge was highlighted. It is in this context of reflections produced by the protagonists of the experiences that, years later, systematisation of experience originates. In this sense, systematisation of the experiences is considered a legacy of popular education for the field of participatory research. (Torres 2010).

> Although the so-called "Systematisation of Experiences" began to be a technique used for the production of knowledge since the mid-eighties, it is in the nineties when this kind of activity gains protagonism. Therefore, its method is taken, adapted, and developed by diverse institutions such as the Centro Latinoamericano de Trabajo Social (CELATS), the Consejo Regional de Fomento a la Educación de Adultos, CREFAL (México), the Red ALFORJA (Central America), the Centro de Investigaciones y Desarrollo de la Educación, CIDE (Chile) and the Asociación Dimensión Educativa (Colombia). Even CEAAL itself created the Programa Latinoamericano de Sistematización, first led by Felix Cadena and later by Oscar Jara. (Torres 2010, p.210).

Currently, systematisation is an established investigative modality that can have different emphasis. So, what are the main features of this methodology? The authors close this chapter bringing six main purposes and motivations: 1: Critical understanding of the changes and knowledge generated through practice, which means a systematic, collective and deep view, enabling to solve real-life situations while learning with them. 2: Strengthening and changing their own practice, through the critical re-appropriation of the experience. 3: Communicating and contributing with other social practices, i.e., to share the learnings and experiences with collectives that act in similar projects. 4: Contributing from formation up to the production of emancipatory subjectivities, allowing the strengthening of the political, organisational and educational dimensions, and self-comprehension. 5: Helping to create bonds and community meanings, together with the sense of collectivity. 6: Promoting emancipatory thinking and participatory methodologies, increasing the critical theory from the South, and bringing together university and community.

Chapter two, *La sistematización como producción de conocimiento y modalidad investigativa*[3]*,* presents an epistemological and methodological landscape to define the authors' methodological approach. Based on the dialectical methodological perspective, and on "a new knowledge paradigm from 'the South'", that "has broken down the traditional dichotomies of nature-culture, reason-emotion, expert knowledge-popular wisdom, manual labour-intellectual work" (Jara 2012, p.75), systematisation focuses on the dynamics and movement of the processes, contributing to understanding and transforming the reality as much as to making knowledge dialogues with new theoretical and conceptual elements.

For Torres, Cordero and their work group, systematisation is a strict interpretation of the interpretations that exist in the records made by the actors of the experience. This idea is based on classic authors that, since the popular education perspective, contributed by bringing a participatory character to the investigative proposal. In this sense, they propose seven steps for the systematization process: 1: to create favourable conditions for the research team and the actors developing the research; 2: to be a need and willingness of actors; 3: to outline the research design; 4: to rebuild the historical trajectory of the experience; 5: to read and interpret the collective character of the experience; 6: to produce a synthesis of discoveries and report r1esults; and, 7: the transforma(c)tion of reality.

---

3   Systematisation as critical interpretive research.

This research appraoch makes clear the formative aspect of systematisation, because it enables both the self-reflection in the process, as well as constituting the bases for other formative activities through the documents resulting from this formative experience. Thus, systematisation of experience is a methodological process whose purpose is the strengthening of the collectivity of the actors, through the recovery of their relationship with everyday practices and of the changing of their actions and perceptions, both to transform them, as well as to support other experiences. It is a participatory research methodology focused on significant practices of social or educational transformations that, based on narrative reconstruction and critical reinterpretation, aims at potentialising these practices and produce new knowledge that promotes resistances and re-existences in contrast to the hegemonic model (p.49).

The third chapter, *La sistematización desde una perspectiva interpretativa crítica[4]* has a foundational character, because it presents the ontological, methodological and epistemological assumptions used by Torres, Cordero and the collective of Colombian researchers that work with them. Starting from Popular Education as a guideline, systematisation is enriched by Gadamer´s and Ricoeur´s philosophical perspective, introducing a hermeneutic theory whose paradigm will be the notion of text, allowing for necessary distancing while not denying belongingness (p.59). The sociological perspective is supported by the interpretivism of Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann and Clifford Geertz, who develop their theories based on the subjective experience of the actors and their perceptions about the daily life. Highlighting the limits of this perspective, the authors, once again, emphasise the critical character of systematisation that opens up for discussion the contexts and discourses that condition the experience.

The critical perspective is based on the Frankfurt School and the global South, both as an action that allows the emergence of a politics and an ethic for life, as a perspective to analyse the complex relationships of life and power, from the contexts in which these relations take place, and their respective specificities. Therefore, the group's understandings about the notions of reality and knowledge are presented, situating systematisation of experience outside the institutional and hierarchical field of modern research: it is a reflective and participatory practice of knowledge production, that aims at critically rebuilding experiences from the protagonists' point of view. The systematisation contributes with formation and self-reflection, strengthens the emancipatory potential of systematised practices.

The last chapter, *El proceso metodológico de la sistematización[5],* presents the itinerary of the research, the methodological systematisation steps. This is probably the most important chapter, because in part of the book the reader comes to know the experiences of systematisation that Torres and Cordero made in the last 25 years. The authors start answering when it is possible to systematise an experience, reminding us that it is a collective decision (the group wishes to stop and reflect about their practices): this is the most important condition. It is also advisable that the experiences related to the governmental or international agencies have an institutional link. Another possibility is to produce the systematisation in moments of crisis or doubts about the practices, when the professionals need to rethink or re-elaborate them. A fourth condition is of academic order, when academic researchers using participatory methodologies find an opportunity to reflect on their own experience, with external support.

---

4   Systematisation from a critical interpretive perspective.
5   The methodological process of systematisation.

Regardless of the reason that motivates systematisation, some initial conditions are required, such as: experiences need to be collective, linked to some group; systematisation should be done collectively and collaboratively by this group and researchers (at least two or three persons of the group need to participate in all systematisation moments); and, it is necessary to have a file (pictures, meeting minutes, videos, notebooks, etc.) that allows the reconstructing the memory of the experience. After that, it is necessary to define the purposes and questions of the investigation; according to the authors, it is more a political than a methodological definition, which is related to the reasons that led the group to systematise their experiences.

Next, the work plan is organised and put into action. More than 20 pages are dedicated to this step, with a well detailed guide for the reconstruction of experiences, that include examples of the authors' systematisation experiences. There are exemplified types of sources, techniques for activating memory and producing narratives, and techniques for recording and analysing these materials. However, how can we critically interpret this material? Models and schemes are presented for interpretation and analysis, coding and decoding, and socialisation of results. At the end of the chapter, the formative character of systematisation is highlighted; not only because the participants obtain theoretical-methodological foundation, allowing the permanent reflection about the practices, but also because systematisation allows a unique form of interaction, that leads to new perspectives on the reality and on the practice itself.

This book is essential reading for both those who work with participatory methodologies, and for popular educators and social workers. With an accessible language, theoretical density and methodological richness, the book allows an initial and deep contact with the subject, serving as a manual for the collective study and development of the methodology.

References

Jara Holliday O. (2012) Systematization of experiences, research and evaluation: three different approaches. *International Journal for Global and Development Education Research*, 1, 71-84. http://educacionglobalresearch.net/wp-content/uploads/02B-Jara-Inglés2.pdf

Torres Carrillo A. (2010). Generating Knowledge in Popular Education: From Participatory Research to the Systematization of Experiences. *International Journal of Action Research*, 6(2-3), 196-222, DOI 10.1688/1861-9916_IJAR_2010_02-03_Torres

About the author

Carolina Schenatto da Rosa is a PhD student in Education at Unisinos University, Brazil. Her research interests concern immigration and refugees, popular education, participatory methodologies, (de)coloniality, and Latin American thought.

Author's address
Rua São Francisco, 292
Bairro São José
93218-400 Sapucaia do Sul-RS, Brasil
E-mail: carolinaschenatto@gmail.com