Interview with Prof. Dr. Laura Scheiber by Lepppai: Laboratory of Extension, Practices, Research, Academic Publications, and Internationalization.

Interviewee - Prof. Dr. Laura Scheiber, from the City University of New York (CUNY): Ph.D. from Teachers College at Columbia University, in the Comparative Education and Sociology graduate program of the Department of International and Transcultural Education.

Interview conducted by: Prof. Dr. Robson Figueiredo Brito: Managing Editor of the *Revista Conecte-se* of PROEX - PUC Minas, Coordinator of the Extension Laboratory for Practices, Research, Academic Publications, and Internationalization – LEPPPAI, Associate Professor II in the Department/Course of Philosophy at PUC Minas, and Ph.D. in Linguistics and Portuguese Language.

Lepppai: Could you tell us a bit about your history as a researcher and your work with young people?

Laura: My professional history with young people began when I graduated from college in1995. I was working as a case manager in Chicago with previously homeless families who were living in a government subsidized housing project. A lot of the youth in the building were involved with gangs. I saw so much potential in these young people, but also saw the difficult obstacles they faced due to structural racism and the social isolation of their neighborhood. One young person, for example, wanted to finish high school, but a rival gang prevented him from safely attending his local school. We drove all over the city trying to find an alternative for him. He faced obstacle after obstacle such as not having the funds to pay for transportation to attend a school in another neighborhood. The experience really struck me because his basic human right to an education was at jeopardy. I couldn't help but think that if he could have access to a quality education in a safe environment, then he would thrive.

This experience encouraged me to pursue my master's degree in international education development at Teachers College, Columbia University. A lot of my courses were grounded in critical theory, and I learned how our educational system often reproduces unfair and oppressive power dynamics, At the same time I also learned that through critical pedagogy, we can empower

young people by fostering their critical consciousness and ultimately encourage them to have a sense of agency to change the social structures that historically have oppressed them.

As I continued my graduate studies, I had the good fortune of participating in a human rights course in Brazil where we visited numerous non-profit organizations committed to the empowerment of youth by pushing back against injustices such as racism, police brutality and socio-economic inequality. Many of the organizations had a multiplicative pedagogical approach whereby the youth they served were intentionally included in the organizing activities and ultimately trained to take on professional roles within the non-profits. This approach assured that the youths' perspectives and voices were included in the evolution of the non-profits. I was inspired by the innovative approaches these organizations utilized and how a human rights framework informed their work. Ultimately, I ended up focusing my doctoral research around the learning trajectories of non-profit leaders in Brazil, thanks to this experience.

Lepppai: What is the practical meaning of the motto "The world we want: me, you, and us"? What does it mean to you?

Laura: In practice, I believe the motto "The world we want: me, you, and us" means that we all have the capacity and responsibility to take action for a more just and democratic society. In this collective process, I think that it is important to think deeply and to take into consideration multiple perspectives on how society not only impacts ourselves, but also others. When we think about the social world we want, it is important to ask a world for whom? Who has unfair advantages and disadvantages due to the configuration of our social world? How can we make change grounded in a social justice framework that fosters equity? I think it is important to intentionally think about the core values that frame our social action. When we work from values grounded in social justice, emancipation and equity, everyone wins because collective change focused on these values fosters inclusivity, dismantles systemic inequalities, and empowers all individuals to participate fully and authentically in society.

Lepppai: What methodology do you use to work with the younger generation so that they become committed citizens to the social transformation of their community and the world?

Laura: I like to work as a co-learner and co- collaborator with the younger generation, especially through particiapotry action research methods that help us understand and address social issues that

directly impact their lives. I believe that the younger generation has invaluable experiences, ideas and knowledge, and that their perspective matters when it comes to knowledge creation and social transformation. Unfortunately, young people aren't always valued or heard in society, so listening to them - I mean truly listening- is really important!

In terms of teaching, I always begin by asking my students about their interests and curiosities to ensure that the learning content is meaningful to their lives and academic journey. I ask students what questions and curiosities they wish to study to ensure that they are invested in the topic and learning process. Using a Participatory Action Research and critical pedagogical approach, one of my favorite teaching methods is to ask students to create a collaborative project around a social issue of relevance to them with the aim of instigating social change through a student-led call to action. As part of this process, students engage in inquiry-based learning processes that foster their critical thinking and research skills. They partake in interactive hands-on research activities, such as conducting interviews with experts on a social topic, or working together to create a digital presentation about the social issue they are researching. I think it is important to get students outside of the classroom and ground their learning in the real world, so their community and the social issues that their communities confront serve as an opportunity to learn.

Typically, when I ask students to create a project, it has a call to social action with a real audience to encourage civic engagement and to help students see that they have the potential for social transformation. Students collectively research ways of addressing a social issue that impacts their communities and are tasked with highlighting specific actions that they and others can take to make social change. As part of this research process, students are tasked with researching organizations, policies and social movements that are doing meaningful work and having an important impact on the social issue at hand. This part of the research process is really fun because students see the power of collective action when it comes to social transformation, and that they have the potential to play an important role in this process.

Lepppai: You lived in Brazil and in Belo Horizonte for a while. Can you tell us about your experience working here with youthful individuals, educators, and researchers at PUC Minas?

Laura: In all sincerity, living and working in Belo Horizonte for 2 years was one of the best experiences of my life! I was fortunate to have a postdoctoral fellowship under the invaluable

mentorship of Linguistics Professor Dr. Jane Quintiliano,. From 2014-2016 we experimented with how digital technologies and teaching approaches, such as the flipped classroom, were shaping the learning experiences of university students. We worked with a lot of young students who identified as first-generation college students and we wanted to examine if these new technologies fostered the democratization of higher education, or if technology was exacerbating inequities.

I was inspired and humbled by the commitment of the students to their studies despite their intense schedules that included full time jobs, traveling up to 3 hours a day to attend classes, and then completing homework late in the evening. (At the end of the day, we learned that for some students the flipped classroom was helpful and for others they preferred a traditional classroom experience. What was more important than the technology was the pedagogical approach. When technology is used to foster active and collaborative learning, it is a more meaningful learning experience).

In addition to this research project, I was fortunate to work with so many amazing colleagues and young aspiring scholars at PUC Minas. I worked on a participatory action research project called, *Redes: linguagem em atividades de atuação e formação profissional*. This project, which was directed by Dr. Juliana Assis and co-coordinated by Dr. Maria Angela Paulino and Dr. Jane Quintiliano, aimed to improve teacher training practices, as well as address problems and demands that public schools face in Minas Gerais. What was so special and inspiring is that the project intentionally included undergraduate and graduate students in the research process, as well as teachers and students in public schools to ensure their perspectives and voices were central to the study.

Thanks to an invitation by Dr. Robson Britto, I facilitated a design thinking workshop and was so inspired by the innovative ideas generated by law students from the São Gabriel campus of PUC Minas. The students came up with simply awesome ideas on how to address challenges related to urban transportation in Belo Horizonte.

I am so thankful to Dr Armindo dos Santos de Sousa Teodósio, who invited me to participate in events associated with the *Núcleo de Pesquisas em Ética e Gestão Social (NUPEGS).* My dissertation focused on the learning trajectories of social entrepreneurs in Brazil dedicated to the empowerment of youth living in high conflict areas. Since NUPEGS focuses on social entrepreneurship and ethical and socially responsible entrepreneurial practices, I was thrilled to

learn from this inspiring group of scholars doing important work aimed at improving the lives of some of Brazil's most vulnerable populations.

I also had the opportunity to supervise a brilliant PUC Minas undergraduate student, Lucas Evencio, as part of an ethnographic research project led by Dr. Payal Arora of Erasmus University. The study aimed to understand the perspective of Brazilian youth living in peripheral areas on their notion of privacy in digital spaces. Without a doubt, Lucas' contributions as an interviewer played a pivotal role in the success of the project.

Most recently I returned to PUC Minas, in August 2024, to teach a mini-course and participate in research activities at the invitation of Dr. Jane Quintiliano, in an internationalization project promoted by the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies at PUC Minas. Inspired by the work of Steve Goodman and grounded in critical pedagogy, participants in the mini-course learned how to facilitate a media-based participatory action research project that intentionally includes the perspectives of young people who historically have been excluded in media and academia.

I am so thrilled to be reconnected with PUC Minas colleagues and am currently involved in two research projects. The first is a FAPEMIG- supported project called "Sustainability in the post-pandemic scenario: challenges and contributions." This project has 4 subcategories and is an authentic international collaboration, as it includes researchers from PUC Minas and other countries. I am working on the subcategory of Quality Education, which is coordinated by Dr Juliana Assis and sub-coordinated by Dr Lucila Ishitani.

The second is a CNPq/Universal Project titled, "Academic-scientific literacy and scientific dissemination in a context of disinformation: training in higher education in dialogue with society", which has been running since 2023. It is coordinated by Dr Juliana Assis (PUC Minas), with the participation of teachers and researchers from PUC Minas, other states in Brazil and other countries.

Lepppai: Can you explain how youth has been transformed over time?

Laura: In my opinion, I think youth today are situated to have more agency than ever before. The very concept of "youth" has changed over time. Historically, youth have had few rights and were socialized to be obedient, with the expectation of following in their parents' footsteps. Compared to the past, today youth have a stronger sense of agency, partly because of the global human rights

movement as well as the important work of scholars in the field of youth studies, such as Dr. Sara Zeller Berkman, which has encouraged society to reconceptualize youth and to see their strengths. I also think technology has had a profound impact on society in general, which inevitably impacts the social worlds and experiences of youth. Young people today have unprecedented access to information and knowledge, as well as social networks. Naturally the knowledge and information we access informs the way we make sense and navigate the world around us. And being social beings, digital networks means that the way we socially engage with one another as a society has shifted in many ways. Just like any moment in history, the ways technology is used and the impact it has on people - including youth- has the potential to be positive or negative. I think our work as educators, researchers and advocates for social change is to prepare young people to leverage technology in a positive way and to be responsible digital citizens.

Lepppai: As a researcher and educator involved in the practice of social transformation, what message would you like to leave us?

Laura: It is truly an honor and joy to learn with and from the PUC Minas community! I look forward to working towards social transformation together through meaningful international collaborations, especially projects that involve the empowerment of young people!