Learning participation: the case of PROSODE, Peru

By HENRY ARMAS

He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.
  George Bernard Shaw[1]

This paper tells the story of PROSODE, a special course of the Law Faculty of the Catholic University in Peru. The course has two objectives: to help poor people access justice, and to involve students in a different perspective of law – as a service for people.

Over the course of this paper, I will describe PROSODE's work with a special emphasis on the second of these objectives. The first objective was covered in an earlier paper (Armas, 2002). As an introduction I will detail the programme and its methodology. This will lead to reflection on PROSODE's experience in teaching and learning participation and I will conclude by drawing on some lessons learnt through this experience.

A different course
PROSODE, which stands for 'Proyección Social del Derecho' (Social Outreach of Law) is at the same time a programme and a course of the Catholic University's Law Faculty. It was initiated in 1992 by students and professors at the Univer-

sity, who identified a need for such a service. That initial participation of different segments of the university helped the project to grow and become representative and, with time, turned what was an informal initiative into a formal course of the Law Faculty.

The course enables students to learn law in a different way, contrasting theory with the country's realities. At the same time, the community benefits from PROSODE's activities, gaining access to justice, rights education, and citizenship building.

PROSODE develops its work through three fields of activity: consulting, legal education, and dissemination. Professors, lecturer assistants, and students form teams around these activities, and the development of comradeship, friendship, and confidence within the team is an important part of the process. Each field of activity is described further below.

Consulting
In the consulting area, PROSODE gives legal advice to people who cannot afford a lawyer through Free Legal Advice Centres (FLACs) set up in Lima's poorest zones. The programme also takes cases to court. These activities help poor people to gain access to justice and acquire a sense of participation in state justice institutions.

In the FLACs, the students attend litigants. They are

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[1] Shaw, George Bernard (1960). 'Man and Superman'. In: *Plays.* New York: The New American Library of World Literature.

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Student giving advice at a Free Legal Advice Centre (FLAC)

responsible for researching, following up the case, and preparing court documents. The student is supported by a network of lecturer assistants, course professors, other faculty professors, volunteers, and other students. The spirit of friendship and comradeship developed within the teams creates an atmosphere of mutual confidence and initiative.

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Legal education
In the legal education area, PROSODE conducts workshops for teenagers at schools in poor zones, where the population is most subject to misinformation and rights violations. All topics of discussion are related to the main objective: rights education, with an emphasis on the teenagers' immediate situation.

PROSODE has also been working with children and teenagers from low-income families in different national schools. The objective is to contribute to citizenship building through rights education.

In order to learn how to identify, research, and present topics that will create interest amongst the school's young audience, PROSODE's students receive special interdisciplinary training (using tools from psychology, education, and sociology) and personalised assessment with lecturer assistants. Students are responsible for running workshops in schools, supervised by lecturer assistants and professors. They also have to prepare informative materials and choose carefully the workshop methodology that they will use. The big challenge is to transform the usually complicated terms of lawyers into simple concepts and examples, giving practical advice.

Through this activity, students learn to work in an inter-disciplinary way, and to deal with a non-expert audience.

Dissemination
In the dissemination area, PROSODE produces a radio programme *El derecho a tu alcance* (Law is within your reach), which is broadcast once a week. Its purpose is to convey information concerning rights and duties to a substantial number of people and contribute to the development of citizen consciousness.

At the beginning of the term, the topics that are going to be developed in the programme are determined, focusing on current matters that will be interesting for the listeners. Students participate in the selection of the themes, thoroughly researching them and developing scripts and other material for each programme. To prepare them for the radio programme work, students attend special sessions which train them to speak to large numbers of listeners.

'Law is within your reach' uses an informal style, turning the complicated language of law into simple and colloquial terms. Students try to give useful and clear advice, and they also answer questions put by listeners on air.

How to learn/teach participation.
I would now like to mention some components that characterise PROSODE's experience of teaching participation in society through a law faculty course. What worked for this organisation? What didn't work?

Changing attitudes and behaviour is much more difficult than learning new concepts. To bring about change, you have to approach the student as a human being, and participation not just as a topic but as a life attitude. The following activities and approaches helped PROSODE to create that internal change in students.

Establishing links between university and community
• University and community are usually seen as being different spheres of activity. Despite the common assertion that the two spaces have an important interrelation, it is not common

Teamwork is esential for learning participation

to find real projects that seek to link them. Academic discourses have traditionally developed far from popular spaces.
- When we think about a university working for society, we usually think about 'saviours' who give charity and assistance. But we forget that university members are drawn from that same society and suffer from some of the same problems. We forget also that the university needs society.
- Making links with the community gives new sense to the university, and has a powerful effect on students' learning and internal transformation.

Interacting with real people
This is a powerful methodological tool that helps students appreciate their role in the promotion of rights and development of citizenship, and encourages them to participate actively in society. Interaction with real people gives students the experience necessary for self-reflection and contributes to internal transformation. Students get involved at an emotional level with litigants and school students. That means a different approach to learning participation in society using their own skills and knowledge.

Students and teachers working in teams
The PROSODE's work system was designed for shared work. Teamwork is essential for learning participation. Shared responsibilities in a practical context help to create a more democratic atmosphere than that of the typical classroom where there are very clear power relationships between teachers and students.

Teamwork encourages students' participation and initiative in a more equal context. Despite the power element that inevitably exists due to the evaluation system, teamwork helps to redefine roles and concentrate efforts in the community. The new and shared objective is helping a litigant, or a school student, and becomes more important than teachers evaluating students.

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Changing the relationship between students and teachers
Lecturer assistants are in charge of small workgroups of students, organised and overseen by the professors of the course. Because of their small size, the workgroups not only contribute to establishing academic relationships, but also to developing friendship and comradeship. This encourages students to share their fears and doubts about their community work and helps to create a true commitment to the work done, based not only on abstract concepts but on real human relationships. These relationships are essential if we want to involve students at a different level than that of traditional education.

Using quantitative and qualitative criteria for evaluation
When PROSODE initiated its new course, the group realised that they could not use traditional criteria for evaluation, which include testing understanding and knowledge of concepts and answering questions on hypothetical cases in written examinations. PROSODE included real experience and participation in the community, in which the students themselves could propose tasks. How to evaluate this?

Using a qualification system based only on quantitative or qualitative criteria did not seem adequate, so PROSODE decided to use a mixture of both. Fifty per cent of the evaluation was based on theoretical preparation, consisting of written examinations, readings, groups competitions (simulation of cases), etc. The other 50% was based on community work, consisting of assistance, collaboration, accomplishment, and a final report. PROSODE has tried to judge the effort put into reaching the goals of the course and the internal learning processes of students. This has only been possible with the input of the lecturer assistants, because it requires very close relationships with students and careful monitoring.

Looking for 'personal transformation' in students
Experience in communities gives the opportunity for personal transformation throughout the entire course. In fact, every educational or life experience means a personal transformation – each lecture, each reading, each chat with a friend.

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Looking for personal transformation in students does not mean a lack of respect for their individuality. Each student is unique, with a particular background, beliefs, personal objectives, and projects. So, when we talk about transformation, we mean the lessons learned and personal background that the course has given to students to help them reach their personal goals and projects.

Lessons learnt

We can draw the following lessons from our experience of learning and teaching participation in PROSODE.

• **Learning participation means using different activities and methodologies, and a holistic approach**

Learning participation in a course like PROSODE has involved an interdisciplinary approach, using tools from sociology, anthropology, social sciences, education, communication sciences, psychology, etc. This not only enriches the quality of the service given to the community, but also encourages the participation of other faculties. For instance, students from the Communication Sciences and Arts Faculty have collaborated with PROSODE in the design of the radio programme; Education Faculty students have participated in the preparation of PROSODE's students in the legal education area; and students from the Psychology Faculty have helped in the consulting area.

Offering different activities and methodologies attracts students with diverse interests and preferences. That encourages students to give their own opinions and suggestions about new tasks.

• **If we want to use participation for reducing poverty and social injustice, contact with reality is essential and, at the same time, a useful teaching methodology**

Contact with reality gives students a different view of learning, and the opportunity to experience their career in the context of social outreach. Realising that they can help people with their knowledge and skills gives students self-esteem, because they feel they are valuable in society.

But contact with reality also challenges students, and encourages them to participate more. They cannot remain indifferent to the problems that they see, and this calls them to action.

• **If we want to teach or learn participation, we need the cooperation of different segments of society**

We cannot pretend to do everything on our own. How can we teach or learn participation without calling for others to participate? A course like PROSODE needed the participation of the different university groups: professors, students, lecturer assistants, etc.

But more than that, it was necessary to interact with different segments of society: NGOs, churches, and civil society organisations. For instance, in the early days of PROSODE, there was no budget to open a FLAC. Due to the participation and help of La Recoleta Church, PROSODE opened its first FLAC in a very important zone (Lima Centre) with practically no budget. The church also benefited from this collaboration because they could offer to the community a new service in their building.

• **Learning participation is not only a matter of learning knowledge**

Learning participation is also a matter of learning attitudes. That is why we had to design a programme that could allow students to develop new attitudes. That meant a very close relationship between students and teachers with the intention of redefining traditional power roles within team activities. It also means making an effort to work with students at an emotional level, and using a mixture of criteria for evaluation.

• **We need information from students about their own evaluation of the course**

Input from students is crucial. How can we talk about participation if we don't give students space for criticism, evaluation, reflection, and suggesting changes?

PROSODE's students participate throughout the course through the different activities described. In addition, during term time, there is a special meeting to elicit students' criticisms and suggestions. On this day, working in teams, students prepare their own proposals for continuing the course, based on their own experience.

• **Keep contact with former students**

Being a course in the Law Faculty, in one of the most renowned universities in Peru, makes this point very important. Ex-students are now developing their careers in different arenas, as private attorneys, in NGOs, the Judicial Branch, the Ombudsman's Office, and other different public organisations. In that context, the role of a course teaching participation in society is very important.

Keeping contact with former students helps to create a network that could facilitate work with communities in a more coordinated way.

• **The university is an outstanding space for personal transformation, spreading participation, and democratic attitudes**
The university is a key space for participation in society. Universities give institutional support for taking action, students have the necessary skills to get involved in relevant projects, and we cannot forget that they may have, in the future, a decisive role in the decision-making policy of the country. Courses or programmes related to participation are essential to the new role that the university has to play.

Today, universities face strong competition and the demands of a society centred around a market economy. Universities are struggling for survival in this adverse context, and fighting not to be reduced to a mere part of the production mechanism. Universities were born in the Middle Ages, as associations of students and professors dedicated to education and a humanistic approach, to producing better human beings, and giving them the necessary instruments to develop activities that could be useful for society. Teaching participation in activities that link universities and communities could be a way of recovering that original sense.

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