LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES
Q&A with Juana M. Sancho-Gil

AERA is celebrating 100 years of educational scholarship in 2016 with the theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies. How does your scholarship contribute to public understanding of professional practice to improve education, and to related political debates in the context of increasingly diverse democracies?

I started my career as a primary school teacher. That was in the days when the population of Spain, like populations of many other countries worldwide, was living under a dictatorship. At that time, democracy was a dream. It was a battlefield where freedoms were lost along with those who sought to protect them. I must say, I was fortunate enough to be born into a family with an adequate social and cultural capital, to use Bourdieu's (2001) terms. So I felt authorized to think for myself, to be as critical as I could be under the circumstances, and to foresee democracy as a space for negotiation. In this context, I learned from my father that "the freedom of an individual ends up on the edge of the freedom of another."

This taught me three main

lessons. I learned that in order to be able to build a reasonably good life for everybody, we have to be able to negotiate, to understand other people's views and values, to argue our points of view and, if necessary, to change them. Secondly, I also learned that many people felt at ease under an authoritarian regime because making decisions implies an effort and entails responsibility. The aphorism, "those who obey never make mistakes" has impacted me profoundly as a young teacher and has resonated with me as I was facing the challenge of how to promote students' agency, freedom, and responsibility in a system that, more often than not, rewards blind obedience. Furthermore, I faced the challenge of how to persuade students and colleagues to set up conditions for students' authentic and critical learning when we were afraid of criticism, and docility was prized. Thirdly, I learned that democracy is not something that happens to you, it is not something that someone gives you. Rather, it is an apprenticeship, a daily practice that goes from the most personal realm to the state structures.

These three fundamental

lessons have somehow guided my academic life. As a teacher first and a university professor later, my teaching was based on respect, attentiveness, and empathy for students. My growing knowledge about how people learn better has driven me to develop student-centered teaching and learning scenarios, scenarios where knowledge is conceived as a collaborative construction, a dialog between teachers and students, who bring in diverse backgrounds and understandings. This concept of construction of knowledge opens space for uncertainty, problem-solving skills, inquiry, and evidence-based argumentation where students become responsible and where learning, agency, creativity, and discrepancies are welcome.

How, then can we promote democracy in education if students are not treated as free and responsible citizens? This has not been (and is still not) an easy pedagogy. Hierarchical institutions that work more as *knowledge recipients*, as transition belts, rather than as producers of knowledge, seem not to be the best possible milieu for fostering democratic learning and therefore, democratic and intellectually independent teachers, students, and citizens.

Students are often the ones that reject this kind of teaching. When students are used to a reproducing teaching system they find it easier, much less risky—although no more effective from the learning point of view. They listen to lectures, reproduce facts, concepts, and formulas, rather than take a chance of directing their own learning, working with a teacher who has to be honest, even to the point of seeing his/her power confronted. But, is this not one of the features of democracy?

As a researcher I created a research group,[1] together with Professor Fernando Hernández-Hernández, based on a democratic management perspective in which all participants, from students to professors, are predisposed to teach and learn (Hernández-Hernández & Sancho-Gil,

2015). This research group has a publicly-stated position that enables us to (a) approach the experiences of others without reifying or accommodating them to our agenda of interests; (b) maintain the tension at the boundaries of the relationship between those who do the research and those with whom (not on whom) research is done; (c) consider naturalistic and narrative methodologies such as ethnography, biographical practices, and arts-based research as forms of inquiry and as tools to recount the experiences (ours and others') that occur in the phenomena we approach; (d) maintain research ethics based on a reciprocal relationship with the other. This research group also maintains a political position (praxis) that leads us to recognize that all research is ideological, in the sense that it projects—and sets—a story about reality that it tries to describe or understand.

In coherence with our positioning as a group, we finish all our projects by organizing a conference, opened to all stakeholders, especially policy makers, to contribute to political debates in the context of increasingly diverse democracies.

Finally, as a public intellectual, I take part in different initiatives related to these topics. As a recent example, in the context of Spain, where a ruling party has approved and is implementing a regressive educational law, I take part in what is called the *Foro de Sevilla.* In 2012, the Spanish Minister of Education promoted a new educational law (Ley orgánica de mejora de la calidad educative–LOMCE). Because it was a majority government, the proposal was developed in an authoritarian manner and was highly confronted by diverse political parties, and civic and public entities.

A group of university professors, teachers, union members, and representatives of parent associations, concerned about the clear educational and democratic recoil of the

proposed law, met in Seville and wrote a manifesto. Since then, we have been discussing the different challenges to be met by education, involving more and more groups in the discussion and engaging in the development of proposals. [2]

You are well known internationally for your work, on the continual change of educational systems in an era of ever growing information and communication technologies. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

After more than thirty years working on the continual change of educational systems, I want to think that my more important contributions relate to the introduction of complexity into often overly narrow technical perspectives of educational problems. When I was invited in the early '80s to participate in the first program implementation in Catalonia (Spain) to introduce computers in education, I brought my educational viewpoint.[3] My teaching practice had already given me an embodied knowledge about the difficulty of introducing change in educational systems. My Masters degree at the London School of Education of the University of London had allowed me to both catch sight of the educational possibilities of new information technologies and the amazing social, economic, technological, political, and educational changes generated by these technologies. In my Masters program, and those that followed it, as well as in my university teaching, my research and my writing focused on the complexity of educational change in an era of unprecedented change in practically all realms of life.

I started by challenging and evidencing the pernicious consequences for educational change of a narrow view of Educational Technology, derived from the application of physical sciences, engineering technology, and behavioral sciences to the design of instructional devices to develop

an *effective* technology of learning. From this perspective, regardless of the complexity of educational organizations, instituted cultures, power relations, or learners' diversity, the best education was to be found in "gaining the utmost information from the simplest apparatus," according to Alfred North Whitehead's dream—although now, in the digital age, it is not so simple.

Confronting this simplistic view, I went on by showing the fallacies and myths involved in the idea that every new information and communication tool was the panacea for improving education and solving students' learning difficulties, school disaffection, etc. (Ornellas & Sancho-Gil, 2015). I also pointed out that the *hardest limits* of these *soft technologies* are to be found in educational systems with compartmentalised spaces, times, and knowledge, in policy makers, and in teachers' and parents' views about what teaching and learning is.

Finally, I also tackled the huge economic interest behind the push for educational systems to buy computers (even in countries without the minimum conditions such as electricity and security, so that they can use and maintain them) at the expense of other equally, or maybe more needed, resources. In this journey I have met many other travelers, and I have learned from discrepancy or complicity. But, more importantly, I have been collecting and producing evidence to confirm or refute my arguments.

One of the proudest aspects of my career in this field was gaining the recognition for the person who asked the most number of questions at the Automating Educational Design, Delivery, and Evaluation held in Norway In 1993 at a NATO Advanced Study Institute. I presented the paper "*Looking for the 'right' answers or raising the 'right' questions? A dialogical approach to automating instructional design*" (Sancho-Gil, 1995) I guess this recognition was appropriate

considering the title of the paper and the amount of questions I brought forth during the fifteen days of the activity.

I have promoted international discussions through the organization of three European conferences on IT in education and society from a critical insight.[4] In 2001, together with Andy Hargreaves and Fernando Hernández-Hernández, we organized an international seminar on Social geographies of educational change: Contexts, Networks and Generalizability, which was funded by the Spencer Foundation. In that seminar, I discussed my paper "*Virtual Geographies of Educational Change: The More Complex the Problems the Simpler the Answers.*"[5]

My reflection, "It takes more than a platform to reconvert a profession," was considered as the "statement of the week" by one of the project officers of the European Commission. This was followed by us submitting the project *School+ More than a Platform to Build the School of Tomorrow*,[6] to the 5th Framework Program on the School for the Future, which involved 25 secondary schools, four universities, a company in the development of a digital platform and a pedagogical framework to promote collaboration and meaningful learning.

The implementation of this project allowed us to more widely and deeply explore the set of complex issues involved in introducing institutional and personal change to improve education. In 2005, we tried to break boundaries and promote radical innovation in education by organising the XVIII International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement.[7]

In recent years, we have experienced an increasing impact of digital technology on people's lives. Knowledge production, representation, storage, transmission, access, utilization, people's way of learning, processing, and valuing knowledge have been significantly changed by the proliferation of digital technology. New forms of labor needs that are linked to both technology and to neoconservative policies are emerging. In this context educational systems become more and more of transmission belts for economic and political powers, views, and interests. The lack of freedom and the scarcity of funds allocated to the development of educational knowledge and technologies make it more and more difficult to promote profound and significant innovation. This is why at the moment I'm profoundly interested in *imagining* new metaphors for education.[8]

Given your focus on educational change, what would be some lessons we can learn from local and global educational change?

In all these years, I have learned some very different lessons. The first is subordination of education to economic and political interests. Referring to technology, Andrew Feenberg (1991) states that "Critical Theory argues that technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term but an 'ambivalent' process of development suspended between different possibilities" (p. 15).

Bringing this argument to the field of educational change, I have learned that education *is not a thing* but an *ambivalent* process of development suspended between different possibilities that convey different worldviews, different ideologies, different interests, and different power relationships.

Throughout history, we can see this battle. Throughout history, we drew the lines of struggle between an elitist education for a few and an inclusive education for the many, where every human being can find a decent place to live and die. As Oxfam International report notes, the "richest 1% will own more than all the rest, by 2016."[9] At the moment, the elite forces seem to be winning, because a highly unbalanced world cannot possibly have a healthy democracy, a quality educational system and a fair society.

The second, which is very much related to the first, is that education has a *revolutionary* potential. If educational systems could manage to meet the needs of *all* citizens and foster the development of everybody's talents; if they could educate critical, independent, and creative thinkers—what the big companies claim they need—more and more people would not have to *beg* for a job. More and more people would be able to *resist* brainwashing, stand up to unchecked consumerism, and be actively engaged in challenging economic and political power relationships and in promoting and implementing a kinder and fairer society.

The third lesson I learned relates to the limited scope we have as scholars to promote *authentic*, *deep,* and *sustainable* educational change. We have a substantial amount of knowledge about how people *do not* learn, about how we could foster more critical, creative, collaborative, and independent thinkers, and even about how to boost institutional change. But, in social matters, such as education made out of an intricate weave of emotions, habits, subliminally learned behaviors, power relationships, and prescriptions, recipes do not exist. We cannot patent and recommend a drug to promote change. Educational change involves many different people, with different agendas, positionings, experiences, and expectations. It is slow, convoluted, and a never-ending trip. It is more of an Ithaka, in the Greek poet C. P. Cavafis's terms, a long voyage "full of adventure, full of discovery," than an *objectively* measurable goal.

I have also learned to be humble, to understand—without losing hope, energy, and desire to move forward—that scholars' contribution to educational change, even if essential and fundamental, seems to be of very little real significance.

Finally, I have learned that we cannot stop learning that external factors move and change very quickly, so quickly that scholars, teachers, and parents alike have difficulties in understanding the emerging phenomena and their implications for education. This represents a big challenge for all those involved in education because we are moving from a situation where we were supposed to learn—to know first—before being able to teach or to advise; and now, we are supposed to learn while we are teaching or advising.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

Regarding this question I would like to say, paraphrasing the Spanish writer Antonio Gala, "I am not a pessimist. I am a very well informed optimist." As different authors claim, we are living a VUCA—Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous—world.

Looking back at history, maybe the world has always been like that, as it is difficult, almost impossible, to find long periods of peace and prosperity without convulsions, changes, social recoil, and economic and political struggles. The problem now, at least for the economically developed countries, is that young people are mirrored in a broken dream.

After the Second World War—but only in some countries' mind, mostly in North America and Europe—the overall improvement in life, with progressive access to education and health for all citizens, with the development of a *capitalism with a human face,* and with the meritocratic move, the message seemed clear: if you get an education, work hard, and make the

right decisions, you will not only be able to have a good job and a good life, but even become rich.

We know that this message was hiding important information such as: you live in the *right* district, belong to the *right* social group, have the *right* color, know the *right* people, etc. Nevertheless, for a while, young people had the impression their future was totally in their hands and educational institutions thought they were fundamental in guaranteeing their students' future.

Today, the situation is quite different. The New Spirit of Capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007) is having a huge impact on people's lives and consequently on education. What kind of education do children and youngsters need in the world illustrated by the Oxfam International report, in a world of increasing inequality, impoverished workers, and increasing unemployment perspectives?[9]

In this context, the mere question of setting young people's educational needs seems very much related to their economic, social, and cultural conditions that vary between families, districts, cities, and countries. Nevertheless, from my understanding of the fundamental role of education, the basic young people's needs to be able to act as responsible democratic citizens, and even workers are:

(a) having the opportunity of developing their potential regardless of their economic, social, and cultural background;

(b) understanding critically their local and global contexts—which entails not only accessing existing knowledge and *using* the available technologies and resources, but being able to analyze where, how, for what purposes, and for whose benefit they have been produced and used;

(c) being able to critically analyze current economic, political, cultural, and technological power relationships not only for understanding how markets are organized and who is in charge of our future, but also to creatively explore different living scenarios.

I know these are huge challenges for educational change that we should once again revisit from scratch, not only the aims and roles of education (a political arena), but also the way of organizing educational institutions and learning environments.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field today?

Precisely because, as I said, "I am not a pessimist" but "a very well informed optimist," there are many issues that excite me about the educational change field today. I'm interested in:

Equity. How to ensure an inclusive education that meets the often conflicting expectations and needs of different individuals and groups?

Feeling. How to foster among students a positive view of the world and their role as children, youth, and adults in an unjust and unequal society, beset by problems such as unemployment, poverty, marginalization, political and economic corruption, and a degraded environment?

Meaning. How can educational institutions, often removed from world problems and students' interests and anchored in notions of decontextualized disciplinary knowledge, capture the interest of students and meet their current needs? How can they promote understanding of social, political, economic,

and technological phenomena in a world characterized by the fragmentation of knowledge and information overload?

Perspective. A key issue to resolve by educational systems is discovering in which direction they set their gaze. Until now, this has been mostly done where most administrators, politicians, teachers, and even scholars feel safe, that is, towards the education they received. How can institutions based on the security provided in the school metaphor, based on disciplined knowledge, time, and space be transformed into learning entities able to cope with the uncertainty of complexity?

These issues, as I have discussed (Sancho-Gil, 2010), mean we are faced with the extremely passionate agenda produced by developments that include:

- *Bridging the past with future knowledge*;
- *Engaging students in passionate personal and social projects*;
- *Maintaining social cohesion*;
- *Updating educators' knowledge of contemporary world issues*;
- *Enhancing school and social system relationships*.

As you can see, there is no time to get bored; just to work with passion and enthusiasm.

REFERENCES

Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. (2007). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). Forms of Capital. In M. Granovetter & R. Swedberg (Eds.), *The Sociology of Economic Life* (2nd ed., pp. 96-111). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Feenberg, A. (1991). *Critical Theory of Technology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hernández-Hernández, F., Sancho-Gil, J. M. (2015). A learning process within an education research group: an approach to learning qualitative research methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *18(6)*, 651-667. DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2015.1049468

Ornellas, A. & Sancho-Gil, J. M. (2015). Three decades of digital ICT in Education: Deconstructing myths and highlighting realities. In M. K. Harmes, H. Huijser, & P. A. Danaher (Eds.), *Myths in Education, Learning and Teaching. Policies, Practices and Principles* (pp. 135-150). Palgrave Macmillan.

Sancho-Gil, J. M. (1995). Looking for the 'right' answers or raising the 'right' questions? A dialogical approach to automating instructional design**.** In R. D. Tennyson, & A. E. Barron (Eds.), *Automating Instructional Design: Computer-Based Development and Delivery Tools* (pp. 79-99). Springer-Verlag. NATO ASI Series F: Computer and Systems Sciences, Vol. 140.

Sancho-Gil, J. M. (2010). Digital Technologies and Educational Change. In A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan, & D. Hopkins (Eds.), *Second International Handbook of Educational Change* (pp. 433-444). Springer International Handbooks of Education.

ENDONTES

[1] ESBRINA - Cotemporary Subjectivities, Visualities, and Educational Environments (2014SGR 0632) http://www.ub.edu/esbrina

[2] For more information about the activities and projects, please go to http://porotrapoliticaeducativa.org/

[3] Resource Center for Educational and Professional Computing

[4] For more information about these conferences, please go to http://ties2012.eu/en/index.html

[5] In F. Hernández & I. Goodson (Eds.), (2004). *Social Geographies of Educational Change*. (pp. 143-167). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

[6] To learn more about this project, please go to http://webs.esbrina.eu/school-plus/

[7] For more information about this congress, please go to http://webs.esbrina.eu/icsei2005/

[8] For more information about the 2014 seminar on this topic, please go to http://som.esbrina.eu/imagining-education-seeking-new-metaphors-for-schooling/

[9] For the full report, please go to https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2015-01-19/richest-1-will-own-more-all-rest-2016

Dr. Juana M. Sancho-Gil is Full Professor of Educational Technologies at the University of Barcelona. She is the coordinator of the research group ESBRINA - Contemporary Subjectivities, Visualities and Educational Environments (2014SGR 0632) http://esbrina.eu. The main research areas of the group are: changes related to the institutional, organizational, technological, and symbolic dimensions of contemporary learning environments; the role of different languages and visualities in the constitution of subjectivities and learning and of digital and visual culture in teaching and learning in the knowledge society. Dr. Sancho-Gil also coordinates REUNI+D, University Network for Educational Research and Innovation (Social changes and challenges to education in the digital age. MINECO. EDU2015-68718-REDT): http://reunid.eu, which brings together twelve research groups from the field of education and technology-enhanced learning from eleven Spanish universities. In 2001, together with Andy Hargreaves and Fernando Hernández-Hernández, Dr. Sancho-Gil organized the international seminar: Social geographies of educational change: Contexts, Networks and Generalizability, sponsored by the Spencer Foundation. In 2005, she chaired the XVIII International Congress on School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI 2005) http://webs.esbrina.eu/icsei2005/. Dr. Sancho-Gil has a longstanding and steady experience in promoting research policy at institutional level, advising research programs and projects, and assessing and managing research projects. At the moment she is coordinating the European project DIYLab-Do It Yourself in Education: Expanding Digital Competence to Foster Student Agency and Collaborative Learning (European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme; Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 543177-LLP-1-2013-1-ES-KA3MP) http://DIYLab. Dr. Sancho-Gil won the national educational research award, first in 1987 and again in 2003. She co-directs the book series "Repensar la educación" (Rethinking education) published by Octaedro and has published numerous books and articles both nationally and internationally. Juana can be reached at: jmsancho@ub.edu