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The many incarnations of a curious researcher

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ABSTRACT

The author describes his early interests, meandering from areas such as woodworking, electronics, economics, and education. Not surprisingly, his career also takes many kinks and detours. From a researcher in a government think tank he moves to coordinate a joint research in ten Latin American countries. He then becomes the head of the Brazilian agency in charge of masters and doctoral programs (and scholarships). From there, he leads the social policy unit of the Planning Ministry. At the ILO, he directs a group devoted to vocational training policies. Then comes the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank (where he became Chief Educational Advisor). Returning to Brazil, he designs a new college and then joins another large proprietary institution. Next project is to rescue a failing medical school. In this zigzagging trek, with successes and failures, there are some constants: curiosity, research and collisions with the bureaucracy.

The biggest challenge in writing a professional memoir is to balance the tone of how successes and failures are depicted. Inflating grandiose achievements shows arrogance and militates against one's credibility. Being too dismissive in the description of success and failures sounds like false modesty or making propaganda against yourself. I tried to reach a reasonable equilibrium between boasting and moaning; but I remain unsure about that.

1. Youth decisions: tools or books?

Some people find out early what they want to do in their professional life and plan their future. I am not one of them. Sometimes I thought I knew what I wanted to do. But then changed my mind. In most cases, things just happened.

Some dreams were volatile, but curiosity never abandoned me.

My first passion was tools. Recently, I found my picture, less than five years old, sitting on a bed, surrounded by tools. From this addiction I could never recover. I was less than ten years when I got my first toolbox. Presently, I own a splendid workshop, with a large glass panel with view to my living room, where my ever-growing collection of antique tools is hanging on the walls.

When I completed ten years, my father took an executive position in a steel mill in the interior of Brazil, and we all moved there. This was paradise: a huge machine shop, many carpenters, and an outstanding group of model makers. I roamed through the shops and a few of the older skilled craftsmen taught me their trades. These activities became the center of my life – of course, shared with girls, when they appeared in the scene.

Around fifteen, I built a mechanical lathe. The heavy parts were cast and machined at the factory, the rest I did myself. At first, since it lacked a motor, my brother cranked the axle with a rope, as done in the past. Eventually, my uncle gave me a motor. This somewhat crude machine served me for many years.

For a while, I spent time with the blacksmiths and learned a modest share of their trade. However, a young technician moved next door. After many evenings in his living room, I became enthralled with the magic of electronics, his hobby. Soon enough, I enrolled in a correspondence school to learn radio repair. It became my new passion. The English language was mastered reading magazines such as *Popular Electronics*. At that moment high fidelity audio was the rage and I started assembling amplifiers - some of them were sold to friends. Becoming a researcher at the Bell Labs was my ultimate dream.

All along these years, I attended the local school. But all that was presented seemed to me dead knowledge. I hated it. Reading science and technology books, it became clear that behind that inert stuff served at the school, there were fascinating ideas, all of them being mercilessly crushed by the boredom of the classes.

My reaction to that senseless avalanche of facts, dates and names was to make my presence at school a major nuisance to teachers and staff. Once a teacher even called the police. The angry letters written by the principal to my father were recently unearthed. To this day I wonder why I was not expelled.

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2. A zigzagging educational trajectory

Initially, becoming an engineer was the obvious career choice. However, as the eldest grandson of one of the firm's proprietors, I was in line to become an executive. Hence, why study engineering and not business? In fact, what I liked was the shop and manual work, not engineering, with its threatening mathematics.

In the event, I enrolled in a Business School in Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais). I found management studies down to earth and concrete, but not too exciting. In contrast, Economics courses, included in the freshman year, opened the doors to the fantastic intellectual adventure of economic theory. I finished my bachelor's degree in economics with plans to pursue an MBA in the U.S. As it turned out, on a lark, at the last minute, I took the national admission test and was selected enter the first Brazilian graduate school of Economics recently created at the Vargas Foundation (Rio de Janeiro). Now the die was cast: it was economics not business.

Upon finishing the Vargas Foundation graduate program, the best students, almost automatically, were given scholarships. I ended up at Yale, which offered an excellent master's program in Economics. After completing it, I went to the Harvard Summer School, taking courses in modern philosophy and a tutorial with Samuel Huntington, to write about corruption.

Then came U.C. Berkeley. There, in a dramatic contrast, the ambiance was chaotic. It was the epicenter of the Free Speech Movement (1965)., Probably, it was the worst year in the history of that university. After witnessing the student protests in Brazil, it was a *déja vue*. Berkeley was the best place to be and the worst to study. Some of the professors were outstanding, but individual attention – nil. In fact, this was one of the ferments of the protests.

While still at Berkeley, in a course with Amartya Sen, I heard him demonstrate how the toolbox of economics could be used to understand education. That was it. The economics of education immediately became my destination. This encounter of two intellectual worlds broadly shaped my doctoral dissertation.

Disgusted with the unpleasant academic milieu, I switched schools once again, this time to Vanderbilt University where I found a more collegial climate and plenty of personal attention given to the students. It was there that I completed my Ph.D.

Management was buried, forever. Later, I disengaged from the economic side of Economics of Education and spent most of my professional life jumping from one education issue to the next. Not surprisingly, by combining my new skills in education with my early experience in learning trades, vocational education has been a major theme in my career.

To sum up, my passions glided from wood, to metal, to electronics, to management, to economics and to education. But I also got involved in nutrition, museums, certification of adventure tourism, environment, and a few other fields. If I could start all over, would I take the same convoluted route? Yes, it broadened my horizons. Besides, being a "specialist" is boring. But the ever-present danger is to remain a gadfly of sorts.

3. A college lifts itself by its bootstraps

My undergraduate program was, in itself, an educational adventure. In Belo Horizonte, a mediocre bookkeeping school was suddenly merged with the Federal University of Minas Gerais. What happened afterwards is a unique case of an old-fashioned and mediocre school transforming itself into the premier program in Economics.

After the merger, an inspired Director created a first-class library and selected the best freshmen to scholarships, under which they were assigned small offices, to remain all day in the campus building. As one of them, I also had to get higher grades, write substantial term papers, and vacations were shorter. The program attracted outstanding students. In fact, medical and engineering students left their prestigious schools to enroll in this less-than-famous institution. Years later, these bright students graduated and became the first batch of well-trained teachers, surpassing its older and improvised faculty.

As one of these students, we hardly had anybody available to tutor us. But we had heated intellectual discussions, rummaged through the library, and discovering the classics in economic theory.

Being isolated, we were intimidated by the students from the famous universities from São Paulo and Rio, where some of our textbooks came from. To our great surprise, we found ourselves outperforming them in the entrance tests to the Vargas graduate school.

What is remarkable in this transformation is that there was little input from the outside world. The new generation faculty was self-taught, by reading books they found in the library.

Like in the previous levels of education, I had my collision with the school discipline. One late afternoon, I was in my office, trying to solve statistics drills, but even with a mechanical calculator, the numbers danced in front of me. Down in the street, bus drivers went on strike and passengers piled up in the streets. Impatient and annoyed by the numbers and the noise, I filled a four gallon can with water and dumped it on the street. After a few seconds of silence, the tumult increased, and it stayed that way. Scared, I avoided the elevator and climbed down the stairs. On the way out, I crossed paths with two policemen, completely wet and furious. Quickly, I left the scene. Once at home, a friend phoned me, saying that a small riot broke out.

The Director of the school met with the Belo Horizonte Chief of Police who was reassured that the culprit would be identified and severely punished. The incident was in the newspapers. The next day, as I entered the building, I was warmly saluted as the "hydraulic economist". But I had to pay for the damage and was suspended from class.

In hindsight, I recalled a tidbit from my dissertation in which the numbers suggested that lack of discipline and good academic results were not incompatible.

4. "Mr. Castro, you read too much and understand too little"

While attending the succession of American universities, my ego suffered a major blow. The first time I was shown a syllabus, my gut and arrogant reaction was: "I have already studied all that". It took me a long time to discover - the hard way - that "studying" is not "learning". I consider this sobering epiphany as the most powerful impact of graduate schools in my intellectual development.

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen was the most inspiring and brutal professor in the department, but he was also highly dedicated to his students. Soon after my arrival, walking through the library, he saw an impressive pile of books in front of me. After examining one by one, he offered this piercing statement: "Mr. Castro, you read too much and understand too little!" This single sentence took me by surprise and more than half a century later, it still resonates loudly.

5. First job: a researcher fearing to become a manager

The recently created IPEA became the prestigious research branch of the Planning Ministry. There, many of the "young turks," returning with their shiny new masters and Ph.Ds., created a critical mass in the abrupt modernization of the federal government. This happened during the military government, when the "technocrats" had ample political power to do what they thought was right.

It was an ideal setting for policy research. Being so close to the upper echelons of the government, it offered visibility and a sheltered position to do policy analysis with freedom. Paradoxically, by being so close to a somewhat insecure military government, researchers could be critical in their analysis. In contrast, universities were, by definition, the objects of suspicions and occasionally the target of somewhat random persecutions.

I was invited to join IPEA. This opportunity brought me much professional satisfaction. However, as only the third Brazilian to earn a Ph.

D. in Economics, I much feared being offered a promotion, inevitably, to a managing position. But I had already decided that managing was not for me. And refusing such offers could bring ill feelings. Therefore, as a precaution, I developed an iconoclastic persona, one altogether disparate from my more sedate peers. And it worked, allowing me to proceed with my research, unencumbered by promotion threats!.

6. Managing education research in Latin America during its inchoate stages

ECIEL was a Latin American consortium for comparative economic research, attached to the Brookings Institute. When the decision came to move it to Brazil, I was retained as a consultant to develop a new project in education - in ten countries. Afterwards, I became the coordinator of this project.

It was a bumpy adventure, given the lack of scientific maturity of the region in such matters. Education research in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Colombia had already matured. Dealing with Mexico was always a mystery. But other countries remained way behind in their technical expertise and organization capabilities.

Such a heterogeneous group required a mixture of technical support, baby-sitting, and conflict mediation. Upon visiting Argentina, our counterparts were worried about a piece of software they would need within a few months. In Colombia, field researchers had to be replaced and the group was dealing with the contracts. But in one poorer country, the enumerators had done their job, but no funds existed to pay them. In another, the logistics were in a stalemate. A generalization became obvious: In more advanced countries, people are worrying about problems farther into the future. In the poorer nations, the problems had already exploded in their faces. Not a very original thought, but it was instructive to see it firsthand.

The most egregious bone of contention was setting deadlines for the papers due in the meetings. After recurrent problems, a brutal rule was created: no paper, no ticket to attend the meeting. It worked, but at what cost! As time went by, better habits matured and peace was reestablished.

Felipe Herrera – a former Interamerican Bank President – was the general coordinator. A few times he had to pacify some disgruntled participants, victims of our dictatorial edicts.

At the end of five years, we were able to finish the many books and papers promised. I took a plane to Washington DC, with a full suitcase of papers and books, pleasing the funding agencies. But the personal costs were huge for almost all concerned, including me.

7. Teaching in the first masters' programs

In the seventies, the first master's programs were created in Brazil. They lasted two years, plus the thesis period. Soon after, I started teaching at the Vargas Foundation and the Catholic University, both in Rio de Janeiro. From an initial beginning in Economics, I switched to the recently created education programs.

In the ultra-soft environment of educators, a firebrand economist in their milieu was somewhat upsetting. I was accepted and even welcomed, but in ten years, never invited to a dissertation committee. Faculty and students were terrified of scathing criticism by an unpredictable professor from an "enemy" science.

During this period, I adopted a practice that worked very well for all concerned. Teaching during the first semester of the masters' programs, I could easily spot the most promising students. During the second year, instead of waiting for someone to approach me concerning thesis supervision, I took the initiative of inviting those students. But under my terms; i.e., I chose the topic and warned that they had to work hard.

It is well known that the most critical decision in research is the choice of topic. A bad choice is fatal. And students must make this crucial decision when they are the least prepared for it, that is, at the beginning.

As I moved along in my work, research ideas came to my mind, but I had to ignore them, for lack of time. Therefore, my students inherited them, together with my supervision. All of them managed to publish their thesis or papers based on them. One thesis got a national prize.

Accidents happened, though. One of the students I supervised had graduated from the University of Geneva, where Piaget was her teacher and official hero. She insisted that his version of IQ test did not discriminate against the poor. We then agreed that she would choose a school, apply Piaget's method and also the conventional IQ test. If her hypothesis were correct, the correlation between Piaget's test and social-economic indicators should be lower than with the other test. But as it turned out, it was higher! The conclusion was unavoidable: Piaget's test is more discriminatory against those from lower-class origins. To her, these "wrong" coefficients tarnished her patron saint, so she removed them from the thesis. But to me, they were the heart of her thesis; hence, a stalemate! The deadline was reached, and she lost her master's degree.

The irony is that, by chance, I met Jacques Voneche, the successor of Piaget in Geneva. Upon telling him this tale, he asked me to see the material. As it turns out, this was a far more original finding than the original hypothesis. Misplaced loyalty prevented this student from getting her degree and an international publication with potential repercussion.

In later years, I taught at the University of Brasilia, the University of Chicago, and the University of Geneva. This last assignment was a graduate-level course on Economic Development in Latin America. I assumed that the students would be of the same caliber as those in the doctoral course I had taught at Chicago. Alas, this was not the case. The majority of them came from NGOs and were far more concerned with passionately pushing their ideals than understanding the meanders of economic or education theories. My course was incomprehensible to almost all and they complained to the administration. Embarrassed, I adjusted the level of difficulty and we crawled to the end of the year. But altogether, it was a most frustrating experience to all concerned.

8. Scholarships, evaluation and crisis in graduate schools

CAPES is an agency of the Ministry of Education in charge of allocating thousands of scholarships and the coordination of all graduate schools in the country. As it happened, it was the best performing branch of this ministry.

With the change of government, I was invited to be its general director. In my previous research, I was impressed by how inane the decisions of the Ministry of Education were. Therefore, I decided on an almost suicidal experiment: to accept the position, do what I thought was right, and to see how long it would take them to throw me out.

My tenure there coincided with a very rapid growth in the number of graduate programs (over 500 by then). Money had been plentiful for the previous Director and still generous for me.

The challenge I defined for myself was to impose some discipline and preach quality above all else. To me, social justice and charity are misplaced at this level. Meritocracy should reign. My harsh words produced some headlines in newspapers and lead to complaints to the Minister. The list of my enemies kept increasing at a fast pace. Rectors and administrators from weaker institutions complained that I used the same thermometer with them, rank beginners. As my standard answer, I explained that, like in medicine, the thermometer has to be the same but the diagnostic and the treatment can be different.

My predecessor saw the number of scholarships rocket up, beyond the ability of CAPES to select the candidates. The solution was to allocate blocks of scholarships to each mature graduate school and let them do the choosing. This was a good strategy, but it begged the question: which are the very good, the good, and the weak programs? This required an evaluation of over 500 hundred courses, by means of peer reviews.

When I arrived, the beginnings of a system of evaluation were in place, but still inchoate. My task was to refine and institutionalize this system. It consumed the energy and imagination of many in our office. In hindsight, this effort was a great success. It still operates today on very firm grounds.

One of the reasons for its success was secrecy. For several years, CAPES used the grades assigned to each program to allocate the scholarships, but it did not reveal them. Meanwhile, quietly, errors were corrected, and improvements introduced. At one moment, my predecessor decided to reveal the “A” courses, but not the grades of the others. The rationale was to move slowly towards transparency.

However, after my departure, a journalist from *Estado de São Paulo*, a prestigious newspaper, got hold of the entire book with the grades. The following Sunday, the last page revealed the worst grades from the programs at the University of São Paulo (USP), then ranked as the premier in Brazil. Around two-dozen programs had an “E”, the lowest level.

Their coordinators vehemently tried to discredit the evaluations. But as it so happened, over two hundred USP professors had already served as peer reviewers in the system and vouched for its integrity. In addition, the group that evaluated Chemistry was headed by the USP dean of graduate studies. His response was crisp: if they got an “E”, it is because they deserve it. The evaluation system survived the crisis and, from then on, became entirely public.

I interpreted my mandate as to do what I thought was right, no matter what. Against the pessimistic predictions from my friends, it took almost three years before the Minister ejected me from the position. I was sad but felt that I had done my job. Up to this day, I do not know who leaked the grades to the journalist and who was responsible for my dismissal.

9. Social policies at the Planning Ministry: can success lead to extinction?

When IPEA was created, as an adjunct institution to the Ministry of Planning, another one was also created to deal with social policies - its acronym was CNRH. It attracted a serious and motivated staff – an uncommon case in public service.

My colleagues from Planning had asked me for a name to direct CNRH. I obliged, suggesting a recently graduated Ph.D. Unfortunately, my suggestion was accepted and he became a most inept chief, clashing with all the technical staff. This created a major institutional crisis.

One week after being kicked out of CAPES, I was invited to replace him. I was liked by the staff, given my previous IPEA sojourn. My name was a relief. First task was fence mending and restructuring the institution. With some patching up, I managed to install a Pax Romana that permitted CNRH to become, again, quite productive.

As the first civil government approached, promising a strong emphasis on social policy, our group heavily invested in preparing an agenda for this new direction. It was a great success in prediction and planning. But after I left, the social areas Ministries, lacking the proper staff, poached the best minds of CNRH. With their absence it became a weaker institution and not much later, it was closed down and the remaining staff absorbed by IPEA.

10. Bullying a well-behaved group of bureaucrat-researchers

With my dissertation, I began a long sequence of studies on vocational training. For that reason, some researchers from the ILO, working in this field, knew me. An invitation came, to lead its policy unit, around a dozen officers strong.

This was a serious and hard-working group, inured to the bureaucratic styles of the house. Reflecting its location in Switzerland, the ILO is dead serious in whatever it does. Watching the group, I saw as my role to spice up the atmosphere, promote more creativity, and add new themes. We started producing an expanded sequence of papers, in conventional and unconventional fields, in addition to serving in many advisory roles.

The unit had loose supervision of CEDEFOP, an associated organization promoting exchanges between Latin American training institutions. A similar institution existed for Africa, but predictably, with a bumpier track record.

Considering the success of CEDEFOP, why not something similar for European countries? In the late eighties, East and West were beginning to meet, for the first time. Why not do it in the training world? Indeed, my predecessor tried, with some modest success. Then came my turn to structure this heterogeneous group and organize the meetings.

Overall, my staff responded quite well to their mercurial boss. They knew how to write in United Nations dialect and the reports were solid and useful, even if a little boring. All proceeded well, for my taste, and my boss did support me. But when he retired, his replacement, who was my peer before, strongly disagreed with my style. Anyway, it was clearly time to go.

11. The collision of dogma, expediency and bureaucracy in the World Bank

The more uncomfortable my situation became at the ILO, the more I explored the possibilities of a move. As I found out, job mobility in Europe works at a snail’s pace. But I had frequent contacts with the education and training staff of the World Bank. Hence, it was the obvious choice. But where in the Bank? Latin America was already trodden territory. Africa had proven to be quite frustrating. But I was offered a position to deal with the Arab World and the crumbling Soviet Union. As an extra bonus, it was a technical division. Otherwise, I would have to learn how to prepare loans, competing with those, much younger, who had mastered the intricacies of this art. Technical divisions prospect for loan possibilities, evaluate projects, and troubleshoot. A perfect choice for me with two fascinating corners of the world to discover.

My first challenge was to understand the intricacies of the World Bank, at least on the surface. Indeed, this can be a lifetime occupation.

The sacred trifecta of the WB consisted of management, technical staff, and bureaucracy. Management imposed on the loans the conservative and neoclassic dogmas of the Central Banks, which comprise its Board. The technical staff had to tread a quasi-impossible fine line between the realities of the countries and the rigid policy directives (such as no deficits, no subsidies, no inflation, and no artificial exchange rates).

The Bank hires first-class academics, but they are not competent at dealing with the dictatorial bureaucrats who run the Bank. Their task was untenable, squeezed between rigid and unrealistic directives and the highly competent bureaucrats, trying to defend their turf and paying no attention to the complexities and foibles of local governments.

As a member of a technical group, I witnessed endless discussions and could observe both the muted and the loud confrontations. And in an institution that hires people skilled in writing, the clashes generated an endless exchange of memos, each party defending his ideas. They tended to be intelligent pieces, punctiliously combining ideological, theoretical, and practical arguments.

To sum up, there were always two battles cooking. The first, quite entertaining and intelligent, was ideological warfare at its best. The second consisted of amateur bureaucrats fighting the professional “owners” of the administrative machinery.

In such debates, no side was declared as winner. Loans continued to be cast in neoclassical formulations, but it was discretely agreed that implementation could ignore them, if needed.

This academic, ideological, and administrative infighting is quite distant from the angry criticism of the World Bank that comes from the outside. When those firebrands define the Bank as being this or that, they miss the point. The Bank has many voices and often they disagree with each other. And often, when projects fail to perform, it tends to be due to the weaknesses of the local bureaucracy to conform to rules that are too complicated or too demanding. Proof of that is the considerable success when projects are run by more efficient bureaucracies.

A very curious but typical situation takes place at the initial stages of a loan negotiation. Loan designers are purists, they want the best and most socially equitable solutions. But these may have high political costs and ministers may fear for their jobs. They often prefer alternatives that are politically more palatable. Here is the paradox: the Bank wants the best project for the country. The Minister will opt for a less good one. Bank officers play the angels. Ministers play the devil.

12. The IDB, a more simpático version of the WB

After six years at the World Bank, I was invited to migrate to the Interamerican Development Bank. Historically, the World Bank was created to rescue Europe after the Second World War. The IDB was born during the Cold War and the Alliance for Progress. Of course, the IDB had much to learn from its older brother. Therefore, formally, they are very similar. In fact, strictly speaking, they are not banks, but credit unions, in which the members are governments (represented by their Finance Ministers).

For a considerable time, the IDB was a less aggressive version of the WB. The technical staff had fewer academic credentials, but greater knowledge of the local scene and languages. They were less arrogant in the dialogues with their clients. Its projects were less demanding and often performed better. Many WB projects asked for more restructuring than the countries were prepared to implement. In the opposite direction, the IDB projects asked too little and missed the opportunity to push meaningful changes.

When Nancy Birdsall migrated from the WB to become the Vice-President of the IDB, the scene grew more confused, more challenging, and more interesting. She tried to impose the painful conditionalities, WB style. As a result, projects became more ambitious and less implementable. Interesting times. Ironically, the WB moved in the opposite direction, imposing less conditionalities, in order to reduce the number of non-performing loans.

Examining troublesome loans was part of my job. One case was a loan to a Bolivian village, three thousand meters above sea level. Considering that the tin mines had been closed, the idea was to redeploy the miners to develop crafts for tourists visiting La Paz. It also included the construction of a new hospital.

I was a bit uncomfortable with this loan and requested to check it. Together with the IDB representative in Bolivia, we visited the construction of the new hospital. But, at the insistence of a local employee of the Bank, we also visited the old hospital it was expected to replace. It was abandoned, as the mines were closed down. To our surprise, it was a splendid building, extremely well built. Repairing it seemed a minor undertaking. Hence, constructing a new one was complete nonsense.

We visited the mines, officially closed. To our surprise, the miners were still exploiting them on their own. However, since the trolleys had been taken to a warehouse in Oruro, they carried the tin ore in back packs. And since the industrial equipment to grind and purify the ore had been taken away, they used for that purpose an improvised process, extremely primitive and inefficient.

The more we speculated about the planned handicraft activities, the less we found them economically viable. It was all wrong: no new hospital needed, no handicraft viable. What the miners needed was the equipment sitting idle in a distant warehouse. I kept wondering whether those who wrote the project ever visited this village.

Later in my tenure, we decided to check whether the IDB was a learning organization. Did it learn the lessons from previous projects? Or did it repeat the same mistakes?

The results were striking. The officers developing new loans tended to correct the mistakes observed in the previous ones. In that respect, the Bank was a learning organization. However, the rules for disbursements, monitoring, and accounting were always the same, repeating the mistakes already identified long in the past. Therefore, in the everyday operation of managing the loans, the Bank was not a learning organization.

While I was there, the IDB had an asset that the WB lacked: great leadership. A poor immigrant to Uruguay, from Asturias, Spain, Enrique Iglesias, studied economics, became the head of ECLA, President of the Central Bank of Uruguay, and President of IDB. He saw ahead, steered the institution through difficult times, and was an astute negotiator.

One example suffices to reveal his savvy. My unit was charged with the mission of developing the strategy papers that spelled out the parameters for future loans in education. In the past, the IDB had made several loans for higher education. Later, they became taboo since those institutions catered to the rich. During my tenure, there was a decision to fund universities again. It was a good moment to prepare a new strategy paper for this area. In it, we inserted very strong conditionalities for loans in this area. Public universities with dysfunctional rules and structures had to fix them, as a condition for receiving funds. But the big universities of Buenos Aires, Uruguay and Mexico vociferously protested, as expected, considering how obsolete and immutable their structures were.

Iglesias received these Rectors and suggested a meeting to discuss matters. A dozen or so appeared, including the same three that were indignant. After the meeting, at the dinner, Iglesias took the floor. He said, we all have bosses, in my case, they are the Ministers of Finance. And all they dream of is roads and dams. You cannot imagine how fortunate we are to obtain permission to make a few loans in health and education. But we can only go so far. This paper is the best we could extract from them. End of the consultation. Instead of listening to an angry rapporteur, we had a relaxed and splendid meal.

13. The design, implementation, collapse, and rebirth of a college

Pitágoras began as a cram school to prepare students for the entrance exams. It was created fifty years ago by four engineers and a biochemist (presently, only three remain). Since it was a great success, the next move was to create a high-end K-12 school. Another success. Not much later, like a few other competitors, it began preparing textbooks, complementary materials, and tutoring for teachers from other private schools. This initiative can be described as a “soft franchise.” By the end of the millennium, Pitágoras had over five hundred associate schools and was considering moving up to higher education, as many aggressive K-12 private schools were doing.

Near my retirement from the IDB and before moving back to Brazil, I was asked to design the Pitágoras college. The project innovated in two dimensions. The first was to get away from the old French system. Even after World War II, its secondary schools were elitist, enrolled few and were highly demanding. Therefore, with well-prepared students, universities could focus only on professionalization.

However, given the explosion of secondary education everywhere, high school graduates no longer possessed the same mature general education. Hence, universities in rich countries devote two or three years to offer a broader cultural exposure, including sciences and the humanities.

Unfortunately, Brazil did not abandon this old French model, despite the weakness of its secondary schools. To counter this, the Pitágoras curriculum I developed had one-third of the workload devoted to general education. It was to be the only school in the country to do this.

The second line of innovative features was in classroom practices. Even though K-12 Pitágoras was an elitist institution, the college was designed to become a scalable model, to permit the creation of a large network of campuses. The goal was to offer less expensive tuition to a broader clientele. Therefore, the idea was to implement a highly structured teaching model. Spelled out to the smallest detail, each syllabus would structure the teaching. And instead of professors lecturing and students listening, half of the time was to be devoted to group learning.

The model was accepted and, to a considerable extent, implemented. An association with Apollo International (a subsidiary of the University of Phoenix), allowed the development of the handbooks to be much quicker, since that institution already was adopting a similar model.

New campuses were created, and small colleges purchased. The initiative seemed poised to succeed. It is worth mentioning, this growth was happening at a fast clip, in many other aggressive and for-profit institutions.

However, an institutional crisis demolished the still fragile model and almost drove the institution to bankruptcy. Since the three Brazilian partners had agreed not to participate in the management, a CEO was hired. But he lacked the requisite profile. A second, from Apollo, was arrogant and insecure. The third, a local choice, seemed promising. Alas, it was a disaster. Eventually, the best minds left, decisions were put in the hands of a non-educators, and the college drifted to a most traditional and obsolete model.

After delaying for months, I resigned, on the grounds that it was meaningless to earn a salary and make absolutely no contribution.

Eventually, the owners decided to fire this third CEO, as a crisis was brewing. The new executives managed to rescue Pitágoras. More than that, with the heavy support from venture capital, it was able to grow spectacularly. Enrolling over one million students, it became the world's largest undergraduate program.

It adopted a low-tuition, low-quality model that was the opposite of what I had designed. In the short run, it succeeded commercially. However, many other groups were doing the same, the price competition is increasingly fierce, and there are signs of troubles ahead.

Altogether, it was an exciting experience to design a brand new and innovative college, and even more pleasant to see the project come to fruition. However, the dream did not last. The model was torn to pieces and replaced by a most conventional alternative. So it goes.

14. When a great leader creates a school

Very soon after quitting Pitágoras, I joined Positivo. As it turns out, it had a similar trajectory. Coincidence? No so much, since both were aggressive and open-minded institutions, they fit my profile.

Forty years ago, five people created a cram school program in Curitiba. With the success of the initiative, they added a K-12 school and then a university. In due time, they also created a quasi-franchise to sell services to private and public schools – akin to that of Pitágoras. The ensemble of initiatives was solid and well managed.

For several decades, the equation worked well enough. But as it happens, four of the original partners turned out to be less than stellar and conservative. In contrast, the fifth, Oriovisto Guimarães, was an outstanding manager and dynamic entrepreneur. Systematically, he prevailed over his partners and forged ahead. In fact, he Olympically ignored them. But he eventually retired, getting tired of these battles with shortsighted partners. After being a gifted education entrepreneur and CEO, he moved on to become a prestigious Senator.

After his departure, the institution slowed down, lost is glitter, and began to pursue short-term goals. Erased were the dreams of becoming one of the best universities in the country! Decision making came to a halt. Within such a scenario, the sale of Positivo was the least disgraceful alternative.

During my years there, I worked directly with Oriovisto. Broadly speaking, my job was to observe and evaluate its different projects. Also, to propose new initiatives. It was interesting and rewarding, even after his departure. But the good times did not last long. After his departure, the veil of mediocrity became thicker and thicker. It was obvious that the time to leave had come.

But Positivo generated one vibrant spinoff. Around two decades ago, a young IT faculty member asked permission to manufacture PCs in a back room. Why not? His shop prospered. Eventually it became the largest computer manufacturer in the country! But long before the recent crises, it had been weaned from the school and opened its capital. It was not affected by the infirmities of Positivo.

15. FASEH medical school: from near bankruptcy to victory

A highly respected ophthalmologist from Belo Horizonte purchased a proprietary medical school in a town nearby. It was then on the brink of being closed by the Ministry of Education. Considering that such schools are highly profitable, it takes tremendous incompetence to go bankrupt.

It is very difficult to obtain the authorization to open medical schools – this is why they are so profitable. Given that, locating it in an underserved location facilitates the approval. These rules are a mix of ignorance and hypocrisy since both faculty and students reside in Belo Horizonte and commute every day to the school.

To somewhat disguise this artificial solution, a group of local businessmen was invited to become partners in the initiative. Whether that helped or not, authorization was granted. FASEH became a serious medical school, hiring retired faculty from the local Federal University – one of the best in the country.

Unfortunately, the local partners were not at all familiar with the complexities of medical education colleges. They saw it as an investment like any other, like buying a building, renting the space, and pocketing the monthly income. And with their experience in small businesses, they could not see clearly the difference between corporate money and their own finances.

The outcome was inevitable: petty fighting and financial mismanagement. Its performance fell below the minimal standards for the Ministry of Education and moves to close it down were already on the way.

Under such a scenario, the school became affordable and Dr. Ricardo Guimarães struck a deal with the owners. As the purchase was sealed, along with a few other colleagues, I was invited to help rescue and revive the school.

The efforts were undertaken on all fronts, financial and educational. Equipment was purchased, better faculty hired, administrative waste eliminated, and so on.

My task was to change classroom practices, in all dimensions: Active learning, better examinations, contextualization, emphasis on higher order knowledge and all the other ideas that have been empirically demonstrated as effective.

Would older medical doctors, arrogant and aloof, accept the sermons of an economist-educator? According to a medical friend, if I were also a doctor, they would flatly refuse any such preaching. But as an outsider, it could be possible. And indeed so. To my surprise there was a very positive acceptance of the new classroom practices. And we gathered some evidence that classrooms were changing. Alleluia!.

Then came the frenzy to prepare the school for the forthcoming visit of the Ministry of Education evaluators. Brick masons, electricians and painters were all over the place. Surely, appearance matters. Dr. Ricardo walked the premises, accompanied by the engineers: change this, redo that wall.

He was aiming for the highest grade possible. I was skeptical, but honestly believed that the marathon of fixing everything would be good for the school. But I was wrong and he was right. FASEH obtained grade "5", the highest! Quite an achievement.

Eventually, four years after the purchase, FASEH was sold to a large educational conglomerate, which already controlled five medical schools. Being well rated in the last evaluation, it went with a high price tag. Alas! With the sale, my position there evaporated. Ever since, I have been doing consulting and writing – papers, books, and Op Eds. Less income but, at 84, I probably deserve a little more leisure and time to devote to woodworking.

16. A final balance sheet

Best of all, my career is not over yet. I still have plenty of energy for a wide range of activities. My professional life continues, a bit less strenuous than before. Fortunately, I am working on some interesting projects.

Conceiving a project, developing the details, and planning implementation, in themselves, are very exciting activities. Even if the initiative comes to nothing, the road offers plenty of rewards. Therefore, in tallying failures and successes, from the point of view of my intellectual enjoyment, a failure is not always a failure but rather an adventure worth living. The road to the future takes unexpected twists and turns, not always of one's own making.

Perhaps one of my more successful ventures came out of applying lessons from my own life experience. Having been a beneficiary of the system of scholarships that were transformational both for the students and the school, I wanted to use my talents to convince higher education managers to create something similar. During my stay at CAPES, I realized that a similar program could be created there – just by signing some papers. My staff bought the idea and it worked well, helping a modest number of programs. After leaving CAPES – and the country - it was out of my mind.

Two decades later, to my surprise, I discovered that the program not only had survived but it boasted around thirteen thousand participants. It survived many threatening crises, since its very competent participants were instrumental in fiercely defending the program. And by pure chance, when it seemed that it was going to be erased, I happened to be working with the lady who became the Secretary of Higher Education at the Ministry. She saved the program.

One other experience had an unanticipated outcome. A close friend of mine, totally immersed in the computer world, invited me to create a startup to produce educational software. I accepted, with the proviso that I did not have to manage anything. The first project was a very modest software program to drill Brazilians in the details of an orthography reform just approved. Thousands of people immediately enrolled.

When the start-up collapsed with the unfortunate death of my friend, I had to move on. Having spent much time in the preparation of a new application, the best I could do was to publish the material in book form. As it turned out, this remains my bestselling book. Ten times more copies sold than the second most popular. The downside is that it is the least creative book I ever wrote.

All in all, I am not unhappy with my professional life along half a century. It was enjoyable, arduous and may have left some positive consequences.

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