

**Higher Education Paradoxes in Nicaragua
Are universities fostering or constraining critical
thinking space toward development?**

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List of Acronyms

UCA	Universidad Centro Americana
UNAN	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua.
CNU	Consejo Nacional de Universidades
UNEN	Unión Nacional de Estudiantes

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Abstract

This research paper is about the political economy of education. In Nicaragua, universities historically represented important sites for revolutionary processes fostering critical thinking and action towards different systems of oppression. Nevertheless, the advances of neoliberalism since the 90ths, plus the comeback of the Sandinista party with a governance characterized by different human rights defenders as repressive and antidemocratic opens the question whether there is still space for critical thinking inside higher education.

Using Critical Pedagogy as the analytical framework and an interpretative methodology, this research papers aims to explore how and why the space for critical thinking on development in Nicaraguan universities fluctuated in recent years.

Some of the main findings illustrate an important historical shift about the role of public and private universities in Nicaragua. In addition, it shows the fundamental role that social movement and informal education plays on fostering a critical vision towards development.

Relevance to Development Studies

This research contributes to development studies since it analyzes the political economy of education from a micro-level. It questions the relevance of higher education to foster a more inclusive and sustainable development by unpacking how different internal and external factors shape critical thinking space inside universities from student's perspectives.

Keywords

Education, development, critical thinking, critical pedagogy, universities.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1. Higher education in Nicaragua

Education is not neutral. It is embedded in global dynamics where different powers compete to establish the social order (Giroux 2006). Capitalism, as a global economic power, has been shaping the relevance of education worldwide framing it as an investment with a rate of return, where youth are commonly framed as passive actors who just need to gain skills and knowledge to “become” future actors of development once they get inserted into the labor force (Olaniyan and Okemakinde 2008, Robeyns 2006). Nevertheless, history has shown that education can also serve to contest hegemonic ideologies awakening student’s consciousness about different systems of oppression, forging critique and agency and allowing a language of possibilities.

For instance, universities in Nicaragua - as in other countries of Latin America - have historically been important sites for political struggle, opening spaces for criticism and action. One of the most emblematic example of students leading socio political transformations was the Sandinista Revolution¹, were they stood up contesting different systems of oppression even under a repressive government.

Nevertheless, the advances of neoliberalism in Nicaragua in the 90ths plus the comeback of the Sandinista party - under a paradoxical role - opens the question whether there is still space inside universities for critical thinking about development where students can question and act towards a more inclusive and just society.

Therefore, this research explores the political economy of higher education. It uses a critical pedagogy framework to analyze how and why the space for critical thinking on development in Nicaraguan universities has fluctuated in recent years.

This framework was chosen since it allows for an analysis on how education serves to a broader project of social justice and change. It provides a more holistic approach to education, taking into consideration cultural, political, economic, social and historical forces while reflecting on different factors and power relations that can foster or constrain critical thinking, but also including space for resistance and possibilities.

In addition, the research is grounded on an interpretative methodology. Two universities were selected as the place of study since they have been site for democratic social transformation; *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA) and *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua* (UNAN). Furthermore, qualitative interviews were conducted to students from 3rd and 4th year of psychology from both universities.

¹ *La Revolución Sandinista* took place in Nicaragua between July of 1979 and February of 1990, led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (named in memory of Augusto César Sandino) that put an end to the dictatorship of the Somoza family.

Among the different themes explored during the interviews are: Critical thinking spaces inside universities, development and its connection with poverty, equity, modernity and economic growth, internal and external barriers for critical pedagogy and also students' position towards development in practice, using a narrative example of the most important development project happening now in Nicaragua – the construction of an Interoceanic Canal.

The research is structured in 5 chapters, who are each divided into subsections. Chapter 1 presents the relevance of the research paper to development studies, the introduction, the social problem and the research question. Chapter 2 introduces the main theoretical debates used to answer the question using a critical pedagogy framework complemented with decolonial approaches to education. Chapter 3 explains how the research was designed and the rationalities behind choosing an interpretative methodology as well as the main ethical challenges and limitations of the research. Chapter 4 presents the three main findings of the research relating them with a broader historical context and the analytical framework. Finally, Chapter 5 reflects on the conclusions of the study.

1.2. Social Problem

In Nicaragua, universities have had an important influence on revolutionary processes by providing a certain margin of legitimacy and freedom in which “consciousness-raising” and “critical thinking” took place. At many points in Nicaraguan history, they have provided space for criticism where students questioned repression and looked for alternative ways to contribute to a just society (ENVIO 1986). As a result, the ‘Law of Autonomy for Universities’ was created after the revolution with the intention of allowing universities an independent administration and internal legislations and academic freedom without any external interference. In addition, the government created the ‘National University Council (CNU)’ with the purpose of articulating superior education in the country and preparing students with a pedagogy that allows them to foster development. The universities UCA and UNAN were the first two universities to be part of the CNU and received part of the national budget of superior education (6%) which benefitted students with study grants.

However, from the 80ths until present time different socio economic and political forces have shaped the space universities have to foster critical thinking and to connect students with the development of their country. First, there has been an important paradigm shift since the 90ths in the development model of the country. A neoliberal model of education was incorporated at this point, which caused different political and social disputes. For example, the UCA and the UNAN where centers of social protest in the 90ths defending the 6% national budget allocation, since government wanted to reduce the budget for higher education. Second, the comeback of the Sandinista party in 2006 – under the presidency of Daniel Ortega² – awoken many national and international disputes over time. Daniel Ortega Saavedra’s governance has been pointed out to be antidemocratic, repressive, fostering political persecution towards social

² Daniel Ortega Saavedra was chosen as president of Nicaragua between 1979 and 1990 and he go reelected again as president of that country since January 10, 2007 and continue to be in power until present days. Ortega is the leader of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) political party.

movement and human rights defenders CENIDH (2016), Confidencial (2016), La Prensa (2014). In addition, different local sources have showed how the government uses its power to influence ministries, police, army, and the state apparatus (legislative, judicial, electoral and administrative power) to remain in power and maintain status quo. However, less has been said about the repercussion of this regime inside the educational system, specifically inside universities.

Important academics as the ex-rector of the UNAN, Carlos Tunnermann, has expressed in different media how autonomy at universities is almost gone (Confidencial 2014). For example, Law 89 of the constitution of Nicaragua establishes a series of rules on the role of higher education. For instance, it expresses that the role of Rector is only compatible with the teaching exercise. However, the Sandinista government has allowed Telemaco Talavera to be at the same time director of the CNU, president of the UNA university and the spokesman of the Interoceanic Canal Project which puts in high risk the autonomy of this institution.

On the other hand, the Sandinistas' rhetoric results paradoxical since their discourse responds to a socialist ideology but their practices seem to follow a neoliberal model of development which may be influencing universities. For example, in 2013 the government approved the creation of an interoceanic canal³ which constitutes the maximum expression of neoliberalism.⁴

The project is a concession to the Hong Kong Nicaragua Development Corporation (HKND) for the construction of an interoceanic canal across the country which also includes subprojects – an oil pipeline, a railway and highway system, two deep-water ports, two international airports, a tourist complex, and a free-trade zone.

The government supported the concession after only three days of debate without any consultation, environmental or social assessment. (CENIDH 2016). Youth was not taken into consideration even though the majority of official discourses claim that this project is 'for a better youth'. The spokesperson for the commission of the Interoceanic Canal, Telemaco Talavera, has expressed how the canal will redefine education at all level, from primary to technical and higher education where science, technology and innovation will be the main field of studies since universities needs to respond to the needs that this project will generate. This vision of the canal and its implications on development and higher education is problematic, since it reinforces neoliberalism views shaping the purpose of education to respond to the private sector needs rather than public needs.

Nevertheless, this project is not going to be analyzed in the present research. It will be used only as a narrative example to explore student's visions towards development.

³ This paper will not address whether the canal is positive or negative for the development of Nicaragua. It will only use it as a narrative example to explore how much space universities provide to discuss this project and how students react towards it.

⁴ Nevertheless, this paper did not address whether the government is reproducing neoliberalism neither to what extend are universities fostering this model.

Within this socio political and economic scenario, bringing back pedagogical debates about the role of higher education towards development is fundamental to analyze how much space are universities allowing for students to forge their own visions about development.

Finally, the next section will present important discussions towards education using a critical pedagogy framework. I personally consider that this way of looking at education is fundamental since it questions inequalities of power and the way specific systems of belief may become internalized in students, affecting their ability to question or change their role in society.

1.3. Research Question

General Question:

How and why has the space for critical thinking on development in Nicaraguan universities fluctuated in recent years?

Sub- questions:

- What are the principles sources where students get alternative viewpoints toward development?
- Is there any connection between socio political or economic key events and the shrinking or expanding of critical thinking space inside universities?

Chapter 2. Critical Literature Review

Universities are contesting terrains. They can foster important socio political and economic transformations but they can also serve to reproduce the dominant ideology- capitalism- legitimizing hegemonic discourses toward development that can result on different systems of oppressions. (Giroux:2006)

Therefore, this literature review discusses the political economy of education. It uses a critical pedagogy framework to reflect on formal education specially the role of universities on fostering or constraining a critical thinking to contest different systems of oppression.

The first section starts by introducing critical visions toward education reflecting on the limitations of human capital theory arguing it is too reductionist, passive and economicistic. Therefore, other approaches to education are introduced as critical pedagogy, cultural studies and decoloniality which recognize the transformative role of education but acknowledging the challenges that formal institutions still face on fostering a pedagogy not only concern with the production of knowledge but also with human suffering and oppression.

Therefore, the second section delves into the contributions of each of these approaches to education with an emphasis on the politics of knowledge. It reflects specially on the contributions of Critical Pedagogy for being a holistic analytical framework which analyze multiple dimensions of education recognizing the colonial history of education – as Giroux has reflected- but allowing a language of possibility.

The third section tries operationalized what is critical thinking and where does it takes place using Critical Pedagogy insights in order to reflect later whether the universities are fostering or constraining this space in Nicaragua.

2.1. Contested visions toward education

Education has been closely link to development for the strategic role it may play on reducing poverty and fostering social and economic growth. However, for it to achieve the outcomes expected by most international organizations and government policies, a closer look should be taken to the rationalities behind different models of education and how they shape the relevance of education for development.

For instance, different authors have argued the reductionist and instrumentalist role of Human Capital Theory toward education. (Olaniyan and Oke-makinde 2008, Robeyns 2006). They had problematized how this approach support the idea of economic growth as the ultimate purpose of education excluding the political, social and cultural dimensions of education. Within this framework, education is conceived as an investment with a rate of return and as a capital good where youth are passive actors who just need to gain skills and knowledge to be part of the work-force to “become” productive members of a society.

This is problematic in different ways. First, Human Capital theory adopts an economists approach as stated by Robeyns (2006) assuming that everyone engages in education for economic reasons. Even though it must be recognized that increasing people's income has a direct relation to improve life standards, especially in developing countries. Secondly, it is instrumental since it values education only if it contributes to expected economic productivity ignoring the transformative role of education collective to foster social justice and change. Third, it reinforces a market driven education which respond to neoliberal models of development giving less space for ethical and social purposes.

Nevertheless, there are other approaches to education that reflects on the limitations of human capital theory like Critical Pedagogy (Freire 1970, Giroux 2006, Morrow and Torres 2002), cultural studies (Anderson and Holland 1996, Anderson – Levitt 2005, Madsen 2008), Decoloniality (Lander 2000, Mignolo 2003, Guiso 2013) and post development (Esteve et al. 2009). All of them have contested neoliberal visions toward education, however a special attention will be given to critical pedagogy due to its contributions to understand education as a broader project of social justice.

Contributions from cultural studies are found in the work of Anderson and Holland (1996) who used the concept of the 'educated person' as a culture specific construct where they reflected cultural practices and knowledge production in and out of educational institutions. They claim that neoliberalism has reproduce a single model of education who define who is and who is not an educated person. Their contribution showed how educational s around the world have been standardized responding to the modern nation state and how subjectivities and inter subjectivities have been shaped to respond to the interest of capitalism. Similar work is done by Madsen (2008) who used the concept of 'youth scape' to study how the educational system is framing youth arguing for the reduce space that youth occupy in educational system around the world reducing their capacity to participate actively in their learning processes.

Critical Pedagogy (Freire 1996, Giroux 2006, kincheloe 2008, Morrow and Torres 2002) have also critiqued the way neoliberal model affects education by arguing how education instead of responding to social needs is responding to the interest of capitalism. As Giroux expressed:

“Universities are institutions that are not oriented to address public needs but the interest of the capitalist production. Hence, schools are the reproduction of the dominant ideology, where knowledge and skills are provided to reproduce the social division of labor”. (Giroux 2006 :45)

Even though critical Pedagogy is not a theory of learning, it reflects among different disciplines linking education with philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology and culture allowing a more holistic approach to education. It also questions the power-knowledge behind the educational system analyzing multiple dimensions of education where the actors involve in the process not only deal with question of curriculum or educational policy but also with social justice and human possibility (Kincheloe 2008:6).

Despite the contributions of critical pedagogy to education, it lacks a deeper reflection on the counter productive role of formal education on reproducing colonial practices. Therefore, Decolonial and post development authors wrote

important reflections arguing that education needs to bring back the plurality of knowledge's that were erased when capitalism and colonialism emerged and are still present in formal learning as a European civilizational project that reproduces oppression under the idea of 'modernity', 'progress' and 'development' (Mignolo 2003).

Therefore, the next section will provide a deeper reflection whether formal education can actually foster social change or not from the perspective of different authors among critical pedagogy and decoloniality. Different internal and external barriers inside universities will be explained arguing that even though universities globally seem to be reinforcing neoliberalism there is a possibility to forge a new type of university that will include plurality of knowledge connecting students with the socio economic and political reality of their countries through a combination of formal and informal learning and resistance from within and outside the educational system.

2.2. Critical approaches on education toward social change

Critical pedagogy, cultural studies, post development and decoloniality approaches all have in common an interest to understand how education fosters a broader project of social justice and change. They all somehow have tried to analyze how power and culture relates to education and how the production of knowledge can be used to foster a more inclusive and sustainable development.

For Freire education or, as he called it 'literacy', is the most important process toward liberation/emancipation. For him, literacy leads to the formation of a critical consciousness and self-reflection action that enable humans to break the 'culture of silence'⁵ that capitalism had created. He had identified 4 basic types of anti-dialogical action as mechanisms of hegemony that form the culture of silence: Conquest, divide and rule, manipulation and cultural invasion. I consider that his vision of cultural invasion which suggests that there is an imposition of view of the world that deprives subordinate groups of any sense of alternative possibilities adds valuable insights to consider how universities frame development and the space they have for students to find 'alternative possibilities' contesting this hegemonic discourses.

On the other hand, he considered the need of external actors - educators - who have the responsibility of liberating the oppressive population through education. He believed that educators can foster social justice by transcending a "banking education" (1996:53) which he characterized as the power relationship between the educator and the student that followed a vertical dynamic where the teacher is the one who possesses the knowledge and the student is a passive receiver of this knowledge. Under this process of oppression where the student has no active participation in the production of knowledge, democracy cannot be exercised. In addition, he argued that during the learning process educators

⁵ Culture of Silence in Freire's work represents the coercive and symbolic forms of domination under neoliberalism. He suggested that social formation and social subject requires an analysis of dominated forms of consciousness. This concept is very similar of the one developed by the Frankfurt School of "mass culture" or Giroux concept of "Dominant Culture".

should establish a dialogic learning with action and reflection theory and practice.

Even though Freire do believe in formal learning as a process for emancipation, he was very critical of the need to connect both formal and informal learning for structural transformations. He suggested that change cannot be achieved only through formal institutions but there is a need for a radical change inside and outside the educational system where social movements are seen as important collective efforts to achieve democracy.

However, his vision of education was contested by the work of Steva, Prakash and Stuchul (2009) arguing that the way he framed education and the importance Freire gave to literacy was part of a colonial civilizational project that just reinforced historical systems of oppression. They contested Freire's philosophy of liberation arguing that the alphabet and the use of textbook had represented the imposition of Western ideas of learning where the reading text was taken as the universal form of learning ignoring other possibilities. Furthermore, they had reflected on the need to change the paradigm of learning about the world from learning from the world:

“Schooling and its equivalents are the only legitimate way to prepare people to live; and that whatever is learned outside of them has no value. New generations are thus educated to consume knowledge under the assumption that their success will depend of the quantity and quality of their consumption of that commodity, and that learning about the world is better than learning from the world.” (Steva et al. 2009:14).

Decolonial authors such as Langer and Mignolo also made important contributions to the need to contest the way knowledge is being produced inside higher educational institutions, highlighting how universities produced and reproduced inequalities linking modernity, colonialism and education.

Mignolo, for example, claimed that capitalism operates hand by hand with knowledge production and that institution of higher education need not be subservient to the values of the liberal state, contesting hegemonic conceptions of universal knowledge (Mignolo 2003). He uses the concept of “Global Coloniality” to reflect on the reproduction of coloniality at a global scale under neoliberal values and principles. As he stated:

“Global coloniality is an appropriate description, in my view, of the current restructuring of the colonial patterns (e.g., coloniality) that have shaped the modern/colonial world, from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. ‘Global coloniality’ doesn’t imply a global university but, rather, the reproduction of coloniality at a global scale under neoliberal values and principles of education.” (Mignolo 2003: 99):

Therefore, he argues that the university was crucial for the interest of capitalism to displace other forms of knowledge that were labeled as ‘traditional’ and that were measured against the ‘modernity’.

In addition, Mignolo uses the concept of ‘naturalization of social relations’ to argue how industrial liberal societies reproduce the idea that modern societies are the expression of spontaneous, natural tendency in development. He argues that universities sometimes constrain students to acknowledge the limitations of development by framing it as the ‘desirable social order’ having as a consequence the exclusion of other forms of development.

This reflections and concepts will be fundamental for analyzing to what degree are university fostering or constraining a plurality of visons toward development. Furthermore, if most of the authors agrees that neoliberalism, modernity and western framing of education has been producing and reproducing exclusion, special attention should be pay on the way ‘development’ is conceptualized inside university.

Even though there has been a lot of critiques to formal learning, there were some important thinkers from critical pedagogy like Giroux that had a more conciliating positionality toward universities looking for new possibilities inside formal education. For instance, he developed important reflections toward ‘breaking the dominant culture’ which are the reproduction of enlightenment ideas towards the role of ‘experts’ and the need to develop a pedagogy in practice that do not limit itself to the classroom and instead connect the student and the teacher with the surrounding reality by exercising agency and political participation. (Giroux 2006).

In addition, Giroux claimed that it was necessary to include inside the educational system a counter memory that could transform history form a judgment on the past in the name of the present truth and can combats the modes in which people legitimized ‘truth’ and ‘justice’.

Critical pedagogy, even though it has limitations, do provide important insights to understanding the relationship between education and social change, since they unpack how power is deployed inside and outside educational institutions and engage with a multidisciplinary understanding of pedagogy.

Giroux concept of “border pedagogy” (Giroux 2006:49) serves best to analyze structural constrains in educational toward democracy but also agency and resistance. His concept transcends Freire notion of pedagogy since he incorporated post-modernist critics to build a concept of border pedagogy which contemplate “a faith in forms of social transformation that understand the historical, structural and ideological limits that shape the possibility for self-reflection and action” (Giroux 2006:49). He suggested:

“the characteristic or a border pedagogy must examine history and explore self-knowledge and critical and social agency. The global public sphere must be a place where authority can be questioned, power held accountable and dissent seen as having a positive value”. (Giroux 2006: 183).

Therefore, Giroux brought important contributions to education since he didn’t discard universities as other radical thinkers but he acknowledges that there were different challenges that needed to be overcome inside and outside educational institutions.

Finally, it is important to bring back Mignolo’s reflection and characterization of universities in current times to have better idea on how a critical university should look like. For instance, Mignolo stated that there are two possibilities inside the educational system. At one extreme is the potential of improving the university within the neoliberal ideals of civilization and democracy⁶ and the

⁶ He rejects the concept of democracy since he claims this also came with colonialism, for more information on the historical development of the concept access his book

other, is the promise offered by the “Universidad Intercultural” (Mignolo 2003:98) as a model reproducible around the world. This type of university will adopt the framework offered by interculturality⁸ and will be guided by the ideal of a ‘critical cosmopolitanism.’ As he suggested there is the possibility of an education whose final goal will be to generate, simultaneously with positive knowledge (medicine, law, economy, technology), a critical understanding that will balance ‘efficiency’ and ‘justice,’ ‘development’ and ‘democracy’, and so on (Mignolo 2003: 108). His visions open a new language of possibility inside higher institutions. In addition, Maria Paula Ghiso adds to Mignolo’s vision of universities by stating the importance of understanding formal institutions and communities as mutually informing places. She uses Mignolo’s concept of ‘border thinking’ to argue for the need of sub-altern knowledge not necessarily separated from Western colonialist thought, but as epistemologies that emerge from the location of the border. This type of thinking will have emerged from “the location within and outside,” a “double positionality with a capacity for critique in both directions”. (Guiso 2013: 253).

2.3. Conceptualizing Critical Thinking and where does it takes place

Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy have addressed the importance of developing a “critical thinking” in current education. However, there is an ambiguity in the definition around what exactly is critical thinking and how it takes place inside the academic world.

Some authors from critical pedagogy as Joel L. Kincheloe (2008) have described the importance of ‘criticality’ in education to contest neo-liberal, free market, corporatized ideologies. He considers that critical thinking is a pedagogical practice where instead of teaching “how” to do things there is a need to open more “why” questions.

As other critical pedagogy’s authors have argued, his vision of critical knowledge also implies the role of educators to question the production of universally valid knowledge. In this sense, criticality in education should explore how in the name of modernization, salvation, civilization, development, and democracy, colonial powers have made and continue to establish what is valued knowledge and how it serves their own interest.

“Globalization and the Geopolitics of Knowledge: The Role of the Humanities in the Corporate University.

⁷ He developed part of this reflection taking as a study case ‘Universidad Intercultural’ in Ecuador. For further information, visit the page: http://www.amawtawasi.org/universidad_intercultural_de_las_nacionalidades_y_pueblos_indigenas_de_Ecuador.

⁸ ‘Interculturality’ can be used as an alternative to multiculturalism. Interculturality requires to learn the processes of convergence by preserving the differences. Therefore, as an epistemological alternative it leads people to think about the ways in which we relate to the other. (Caudillo and Ospina 2006)

Furthermore, critical thinking will address also the epistemological production of knowledge allowing space for contested visions over the predominant positivist framework that predominate in most universities around the world. Positivist education will appeal for objective and scientific truth where the scientific method is the only validated way to produce “real knowledge”.

Therefore, critical thinking should foster a type of knowledge production that can contribute to build a just society and listen to different oppressed groups validating their ways of learning and developing. Since knowledge is a social construction, it will imply that students develop the capacity to learn, relearn and unlearn about the world.

2.4. Where does critical thinking takes place?

The previous literature reflects on the importance of critical pedagogy and tries to characterize in a broad way what does “thinking critically” means. However, it does not express directly where does critical thinking takes place and there was not specific literature -at least in my experience reviewing this topic- that illustrate this.

From critical pedagogy we can state that the curriculum, the relation between teachers and students, the cultural, political and economic experiences of students outside and inside educational institutions, among others, are important sites to explore the production of knowledge. However, there is little discussion about other sites that may influence critical thinking formation like volunteering, extracurricular activities, among others. Furthermore, there are other ‘spaces’ where students can express actively their agency in an individual or collective action. Therefore, for the purpose of this study I will use the concept of “civic space” used in civil society literature in order to explore what other spaces, whether physical or not, are inside universities that may foster or constrain students critical thinking toward development. Civic Space will be understood as an interrelated concept, as a ‘condition’ to foster critical thinking but also as an ‘outcome’

Civic space is closely linked to what Frankfurt thinkers called ‘public sphere’ which was a space where different people- mostly men at that time - could get together and influence political decisions that were affecting the development of their countries. Citizens and other actors were able to claim their rights and influence the economic and socio-political structures around them. Nevertheless, this has been a contested space where the role of the state affects directly the shrinking or expanding the public sphere or ‘civic space’ as it is called nowadays.

As stated by CIVICUS (2017), when a state is democratic, it should respect and protect its citizens and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions. It can be inferred that the same situation may happen inside university; a democratic state should respect universities autonomy and foster students to contribute to development. However, when the state is categorized as non-democratic it may affect directly the way students build their critical viewpoints shrinking the space for them to have freedom of expression, association and limiting their agency to contest different forms of oppressions.

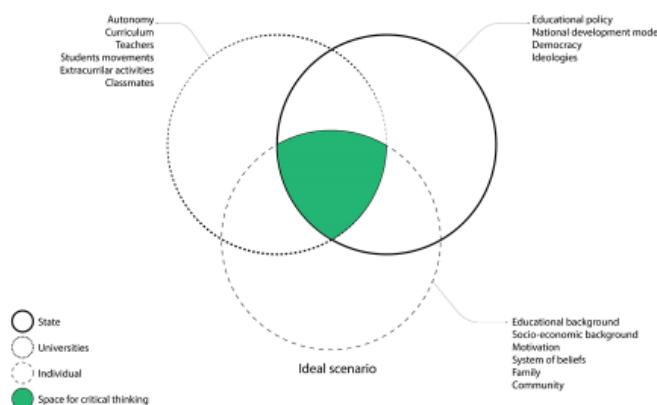
Therefore, this concept will also be taken into consideration in further reflection specially while analyzing the role of the state.

From the previous discussion, it can be concluded that critical thinking should be a transversal axis of all action lines inside universities since it is related to the curriculum, student-teacher dialectic learning, ideologies, inside and outside factors that constrain or foster critical pedagogy. Therefore, this space should enable students to construct their own meaning, interpretive strategies, criteria for producing and consuming knowledge as well as acting toward different injustices and oppressions.

The following graph will be used to illustrate the “space” for critical thinking and different factors that were extracted from the previous discussions that may constrain or expand critical thinking space:

Figure 1. Graphical Representation of ‘critical thinking space.’

Graphical Representation of “ Space for Critical Thinking”



Source: Author's own based on the analysis of critical literature review.

Critical thinking space is represented in the middle, highlighted in green, as the result of the interaction among different forces regarding the individual, the university and the state.⁹

2.5. Conclusions

Universities represent important formal sites for knowledge construction. They are supposed to generate public knowledge through interdisciplinary lenses to give solutions to complex and multiple social problems. However, different authors from Critical Pedagogy and Decoloniality have been warning through their

⁹ Neoliberalism is embedded at all levels since it is such a strong force that influences the individual, the state and the universities. It must be stated that the private sector also shapes critical thinking space and neoliberal ideologies could be included there but for the present study it will not be included. A more protagonist role is given to the state since it can reinforce or contest neoliberal visions of development.

work how universities are increasingly responding more to neoliberal development providing a market driven education that is not oriented to address public goods but rather the need of capitalist production. In addition, they reflected on how universities may be reproducing colonial oppression by reinforcing a positivist knowledge construction with “experts” and “science” and “objectivity” as the only legitimate knowledge dismissing other forms of knowing that were oppressed during colonial time. Therefore, strong critiques have been made to formal learning where special attention should be given to the way development is conceptualized inside universities so they don’t produce a counter effect on fostering oppressions and inequalities instead of breaking them through the production of knowledge.

Despite of this, a language of possibility still exists as the example of the ‘Universidad Intercultural’ where a more inclusive education can be constructed if pedagogy includes a production of knowledge inside and outside formal institutions, oriented to responds to local needs without discarding other international learnings.

Therefore, the next chapter will present the methodology and methods that were used to explore ‘critical thinking space’ taking into consideration all the internal and external forces that shape education inside formal institutions as represented in the graph.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and methods

The following section explains the methodology and methods chosen in the present study and how they respond to a broader ontological and epistemological standpoint regarding the researcher's positionality.

The first section introduces the advantages of adopting a interpretivist methodology which guides and anchors the data collection and analysis. The selection of this methodology is grounded on a constructivist epistemology since it recognizes that meanings are social constructions with multiple interpretations useful in context-specific researches like the one being presented. In addition, it will be discussed how this methodology differ from others arguing that the intention is not to find a 'single truth' but rather to explore multiple social realities from the perspective of students. (Yanow 2012) It will describe some characteristic of it like the flexibility for new choices and the role of the researcher as a co-generator of knowledge, among others. Furthermore, there will be a general description on how research design responds to the methodology, specially toward the selection of the universities.

The second section explains why semi- structure interviews were chosen as the main method. It will explain how this method benefits an interpretivist methodology since it facilitates the exploration of different themes in context like youth and higher education, critical thinking and development, among others. In addition, there will be a detail description about how the method was used explaining some selection criteria for the collection of data.

The third section will describe some ethical implications and limitations of the present study regarding the collection and analysis of data.

Finally, this chapter will finish introducing the socio economic characteristics and educational background of the students that participated in the study. The intention is to describe some similarities and differences that students shared that may be important to consider in the next chapter while presenting the main findings.

3.1. Methodology

Prasad (2005: 13) stated "interpretative tradition takes human interpretation as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world". Following this rationality, this research from the beginning adopted a interpretivist methodology to generate new knowledge about the political economy of education exploring why and how has the space for critical thinking in Nicaragua higher education has been changing in the recent years. In order to answer this question, the research design included a field work phase from August 3 to September 4 of 2017 for the data collection and a later phase of 3 months for data analysis.

Two universities were selected as the place of study; one public named 'National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN)' and one private 'Central American University '(UCA)'. Both of them have historical relevance since they were the first two universities founded in Nicaragua where at some point in the

history adopted critical pedagogy approaches in their educational model giving space to students to connect with the reality of the country.

The picture below shows a historical memory of the revolution painted in the walls of UNAN university.

Figure 2. Example of a Painting at UNAN walls



Source: Author's own

UCA differs a lot from UNAN since it has a more conservative environment. There are no revolutionary messages inside their walls neither student's organizations. Overall, it has a better infrastructure and a more quite learning space. The following photo shows how UCA looks like:

Figure 3. Picture of UCA university



Source: Author's own.

In addition, both universities are currently part of the CNU (National University Council) which means that they – as other higher educational institutions- receive part of the 6% of the national budget¹⁰ which is a key feature to explore autonomy and external forces that may influence critical thinking. Furthermore, they have been known for having the best humanities department in the country, therefore, it can be inferred that they should be leading critical thinking debates about the role of education toward development.

The ‘subject’ of the present study were students from psychology enrolled at both university- the next section will explain the criteria selection. It is important to acknowledge that under an interpretivist methodology this implies that they do not belong to a homogeneous group but rather recognizes them as multiple, heterogeneous embodied, gendered, racialized subjects, produced through a specific history. Therefore, as Yanow (2012:4) suggested, the purpose of the research is not to find one objective truth but rather “it explores multiple- and potentially- intersubjective constructed truths about social, political, cultural, and other human events”.

Under interpretivism, I- as the researcher- was allowed to interact with these students by positioning myself as part of the intersubjective social processes being study. Therefore, the selection of this methodology responds to my own positionality toward the construction of knowledge where I believe reality is a social construction shaped by power relationship that may influence student’s subjectivities.

Furthermore, interpretivist methodology contest positivist epistemologies¹¹ that are more oriented toward ‘generalization’ and ‘objectivity’ . In contrast, it avoids generalizations and looks for local situated knowledge trying to interpret the meanings that students gave to different. Therefore, all the phases of the research were oriented toward a more subjective understanding of the process of knowledge construction.

Regarding the data analysis, it is important to mention that even though different concepts were used from critical pedagogy and decoloniality to guide the analysis, overall, the intention was not to prove them, neither to test the accuracy of those understandings, but rather they were used to have a broader understanding on my topic and use them consciously to build more coherent arguments while analyzing the main findings.

In addition, qualitative software name ‘ MAXQDA’ was used to analyze the information collected . As a result, an analysis table was created and later a table showing the main similarities and differences among UCA and UNAN that can be seen in the appendix A of this research.

Overall, the intention behind the research design is to explain how and why these universities that once tried to incorporate a more critical approach to education- linking students with broader development project and fostering their

¹⁰ Higher education has been assigned with the highest amount of national budget in comparison with the budget assigned to early childhood, primary or secondary education investment.

¹¹ The verb “contest” is not intended to invalidate positivism, however, due to the general critiques that interpretivist methodologies have received for lacking a rigid methodology or not proving a previous hypothesis in their findings, it was used to point out how it differ from the other and which is the main purpose of it.

political and social participation- have changed over the time, questioning if there is still a remaining space for students to develop a more critical thinking inside their education.

3.2. Method

Once universities where selected as the place of study, the second important decision during the design was choosing the sample. From the beginning, the study was intended to explore student's perceptions toward critical thinking spaces inside their universities. Even though there are different actors involved in the learning process, I wanted to focus on how students interpret their educational experience through their individual narratives. However, due to time constrains and resources the study could not include all students from both universities, therefore I developed selection criterion that will allowed me to compare student's narratives from both universities.

At some point during the research I wanted to work with sociology's students at both universities since the subjects of sociology's curriculum are directly connected with development from a macro perspective providing a general understanding of economics, politics and history. Nevertheless, UNAN does not have sociology in their academic offer – only a mix career of anthropology with sociology – which made difficult the comparative focus of the study. Therefore I searched for an alternative careers within humanities ¹² which led me to the selection of psychology for different reasons.

First, my own positionality which considers that education should foster critical thinking among all careers since development is multidimensional and affect both students for psychology, sociology, law, etc.

Second, education as a public good should reinforce among all careers a connection between theory and practice, action and reflection where students can engage with the economic, political, cultural and social transformation. Therefore, students, independent from their career, should develop critical thinking skills on how to use their education to foster a more inclusive and just development.

Third, psychology was the only career from the humanity department which was open in both universities and has a similar curriculum, even though UCA has a more social orientation and UNAN a more clinical one.

In addition, students were chosen from third and fourth since they had already received courses related to development. For example, in UCA students

¹² The analytical framework I used – critical pedagogy- does not suggest any relation between critical thinking and a particular career or department. However, to reduce the sample I chose one career from the humanity department, among other departments, since humanities are supposed to connect more students with social justice perspectives and development in a micro and macro level. Furthermore, it was going to be more accessible to work with students that are already familiar with some concepts that wanted to be explored like poverty, equity, development, among others.

have a 'Poverty and Development' course whether in UNAN they receive a 'National Reality' course which in a way are connected to national development issues.

It may be important to mention that there is an overall positivist tendency in psychology studies at both universities and I, as the searcher was already conscious ¹³ of it. In addition, psychology - at least in UCA- oriented to teach development from a micro perspective – development of the individual- rather than positioning development from a macro perspective more connected with policy implications. Nevertheless, I did not consider it a limitation since using an interpretivist methodology allowed me to use a flexible method were I could interact with the students in order to clarify the focus of the study.

Therefore, my main method was semi –structure interviews applied to student from both UCA and UNAN universities, enrolled in the bachelor degree of psychology. As a result, a total of 20 interviews were conducted, 10 from each university, in order to reflect on different narratives about the research problem (Appendix 1.).

During the interviews I was allowed to explore student's perception about youth, development and education in their own learning contexts since I choose to performed all the interviews inside both universities. A snowball method was used to select students from the same careers in both universities. Each student interviewed gave me information about where I could find another student as well as giving me information about the courses schedule. It must be stated that selection criteria was used since I did not wanted to ask for official permission at the universities due to the political environment of Nicaragua specially at UNAN.¹⁴

The amount of interviews applied do not respond to a representative sample since the intention was not to look for generalization but rather to deep- in on student's perceptions trying to reflect criticality on their different narratives.

Overall I did not encounter any major difficulty during the field work phase since finished all my interview on time. Nevertheless, it may be important to highlight that working at UNAN was a little bit more difficult rather than UCA- since UNAN's students were more resistant and suspicious to express their viewpoint, specially toward the end. This may be associated with different socio economic and historical factors that will be address in chapter 4 where the general findings will be presented.

3.3. Risk and Ethical Challenges

One of the main risk assume before selecting the topic was the limited access to public information in my country. It was very hard to find information about the history of both universities and how they have been framing development.

¹³ I studied psychology at UCA university so I understand use of the word "development" in the context of psychology courses.

¹⁴ If I asked for permission the research was at risk due to the intervention of the authorities. There are different cases of students trying to research inside public universities were the authorities deny access to the site.

There are no accessible studies- at least from what I reviewed - neither systematized information. Most contextual information was collected from secondary interviews to academic staff, which in the case of UNAN was difficult to access due to bureaucratic procedures.

Another risk was the feasibility of the project since using an interpretivist methodology depends on the openness's of the students. Even though I could have finished my 20 interviews it must be pointed out that it was harder to work at UNAN in comparison to UCA. Students were more resistant to give extended answers and have more difficulties to express their ideas in a clear and coherent way. In addition, there were secondary interviews done to teachers and most of them were very open and direct with their answers but making clear that they cannot be named inside the research paper, even though I explain that I was going to maintain confidentiality as my ethical duty toward the research process.

On the other hand, I consider challenging working with both universities due to time constraints. It was not possible to make a deeper analysis on different action lines that both universities have. (curriculum, social extension and teaching- learning process). It will be interesting for future studies to compare careers within the same universities since some of the result suggest that there are important differences among department regarding the way they understand development, the methodologies implemented during the courses, among other factors.

To conclude, I acknowledge my own positionality towards the research since the methodology I chose allowed me to be embedded into the research process -with my specific systems - consciousness of not making any value of judgment while interviewing the students.

3.4. Socio Economic Background

Before introducing the main findings of the research, this section provides a general characterization of the students that participated during the interviews. There were a total of 20 students; 10 from UCA and 10 from UNAN.

As stated before, they were not a homogenous population but rather they shared different socio economic and educational characteristics that were explore during the interviews. The table below illustrates the results:

Table 1. Socio economic an educational background of students.

Interviews	Age	Gender	City	Ur-ban/Rural	Pub-lic/Pri- vate high school	Do you work?	Educational level of stu- dent's parents
UCA- 1	22	Female	Chontales	semi urban	Private	No	My father has a PHD and my mother has a master degree.
UCA-2	21	Male	Managua	urban	Private	No	My mother finished third year of university
UCA-3	20	Male	Managua	Urban	Private	No	My mother did not finish her university and my father did complete university.

UCA- 4	24	Female	Leon	Urban	Private	No	My mother complete her university and my father has a master degree.
UCA- 5	20	Male	Managua	Urban	Private	No	My father studied until high school my mother finished university.
UCA- 6	20	Female	Managua	Urban	Private	yes	My mother has a master degree in education and my father is a lawyer.
UCA- 7	21	Male	RAAC-N	urban	Private	No	Just my father who finished his university my mother didn't study.
UCA- 8	20	Female	Managua	Urban	Private	No	My mother studied until four year in secondary and my father just did second year of secondary.
UCA- 9	21	Female	Nueva Segovia	Urban	Private	No	My mother study until primary and my father until secondary.
UCA- 10	20	Female	Managua	Urban	Private	No	Both of them study business administration in UCA.
UNAN- 1	19	Female	Nueva Segovia	Urban	Public	No	Both completed the university.
UNAN- 2	22	Male	Managua	Semi Urban	Public	No	My mother did a technical study.
UNAN- 3	19	Male	Managua	Urban	Private	No	My mother complete university and my father did a technical study
UNAN- 4	18	Female	Managua	Urban	Public	yes	My mother finished second year of high school and my father did not study.
UNAN- 5	20	Female	Managua	Urban	Public	yes	My mother secondary my father technical study
UNAN- 6	19	Male	Managua	Urban	Public	No	My father finished university
UNAN- 7	19	Male	Masaya	Semi Urban	Public	No	both finished university
UNAN- 8	22	Female	Managua	Urban	Public	No	Both finished university
UNAN- 9	21	Female	Chontales	Urban	Public	No	My mother finished a technical study
UNAN- 10	18	Female	Managua	Urban	Public	No	My mother finished university

Source: Elaborated by the author based on the results of the interviews.

For instance, most students interviewed were woman and identified themselves as females. The media age among the students is 20 years old and they are in third and 4th year of their careers. The majority of students lives in urban contexts. Furthermore, majority of students were from Managua, the capital of the country. Only one student is from the Atlantic coast which is one of the most excluded areas in the country.

Despite the similarities describe above, UCA and UNAN students shared some differences, especially in relation to their academic background and the educational level of their parents which is important to consider in the analysis.

Furthermore, one important different is the educational level of students since all of UNAN's students -except one- came from public schools while UCA students from private. It is important to mention that in the Nicaragua context education is strongly divided among private and public schools were public schools tend to have low quality and low infrastructure while private have better quality and more resources. Therefore, UCA students who came from private schools may have a better educational background rather than UNAN plus more economic possibilities to choose whether they want to study in a public or private university.

Therefore, from the table below it can be inferred that students from UNAN are from middle class while UCA students may be from middle-high class

This broad characterization has the purpose of recognizing important socio economic or educational differences that may influence the way both students perceived critical thinking spaces toward development. Therefore, the next Chapter will present the main findings of the study analyzing different internal and external factors that students recognizes as shrinking or expanding critical thinking space inside their universities.

Chapter 4 - Main findings

This chapter presents the main findings of the research paper. It identifies different internal and external factors that could shrink or expand critical thinking space regarding the university, the state and the individual. Furthermore, since student's narratives are considered multiple constructed 'truth' embedded in a particular context with specific situated meanings, this research presents also a general contextualization about main socio economic and political events in Nicaragua that had influenced critical thinking space inside universities from a historical perspective. This will allow a deeper analysis trying to respond to the initial question of the research: How and why has the space for critical thinking on development in Nicaraguan universities fluctuated in recent years? Therefore, the main findings include interrelations between these historical events and the student's narratives.

The first section will present the historical background ¹⁵on how universities have been fluctuating the spaces for critical pedagogy in recent years. The second part, describes the main internal and external factors that shape the critical thinking space at universities. Finally, the third chapter illustrates the main finding based on the different factors identified earlier.

Even though these findings are presented in separate sections there are all interconnected as part of a broader story regarding, youth, education and development in Nicaragua.

4. 1. Switching pedagogies

In Nicaragua, higher education has been an important site for critical thinking toward how to achieve a more inclusive and just society. At different moments in the history, students have participated actively in social and political transformation as winning the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 or fighting for autonomy law and 6% - as stated in chapter 1.

However, universities have also been institutions that produce and reproduce the 'dominant ideology'. The educational model has been responding to the government in power without continuity from one period to another. For instance, during the Sandinista governance ¹⁶ there educational model incorporated Freire's vision toward an active learning were education foster action with

¹⁵ This historical background is mainly focus on the way universities adopted or not critical pedagogy approaches inside their educational model. It has limitations due to time constrain since it did not analyze the educational model of each period only different texts, interviews, articles and news that inform toward how universities were fostering a critical learning in the past.

¹⁶ It is important to clarify that even though there were some intents to incorporate critical pedagogy approaches inside education there were a lot of problems and failures in the Sandinista governance specially toward the quality of it. However, this paper is not going to deep in on education during the Sandinista period since the intention was only to illustrate that until some extend education did follow some critical pedagogy approaches in order to question what is happening now.

reflection, theory and practice rooted in holistic understanding of the social, political, cultural and economic context where students were inserted. The Sandinista governance foster a pedagogy that could connect students directly with the needs of the country. For example, they developed the creation of the 'Law on Promotion and Promotion of Production Practices in Higher Education' in 1982, which allowed the student to be linked to the field of work that relates more to their career- which continues until now. Other examples of the efforts done to include critical pedagogy approaches were the 'Scientific development day' or in Spanish '*Jornada de Desarrollo Científicos*'¹⁷ which promoted alternative solutions to local problems using science and technology or the 'Student Battalions of Production (BEP)' which represented an important space outside classrooms since students participated in coffee and cotton cuts as part of a broader developmental policy.

However, this approach to education ended when the government lost the elections and a neoliberal period was established in the country which lasted from 1990 to 2006. Under neoliberalism there was a radical shift on the purpose of education where the government discontinued the revolutionary project that started in the 80s and introduce a human capital approach to education. For instance, there was an accelerated process of proliferation of private universities with a wide educational offer, 43 private universities versus 6 publics, where the educational offer not necessarily responded to the needs of the country but rather to the needs of the private enterprise. (Secondary Interview 2, 2017) Furthermore, there was a predominant theoretical education where the purpose of education was more oriented toward obtaining a degree rather than expanding knowledge. As a consequence, there was a greater emphasis on the teaching process rather than the learning process

Nevertheless, in 2006 the Sandinista party came back in power until present days with the same president and with the same socialist discourse.¹⁸ However, his governance has been critiqued by different organizations, human rights defenders and opposition groups - as mentioned in chapter 1 - claiming the old "*Sandinismo*" is almost lost and instead there is a repressive and authoritarian governance that impose their political agenda in all sectors of society giving a reduced space to civil society and using military forces and the policy to silence opposition groups.

For instance, there has been a political persecution toward the 'Peasant movement in defense of water, land and sovereignty' since they are against the canal project claiming for a new development model that should respond to local needs and not the needs of capitalism. (La Prensa 2016; Confidencial 2016). The photo below illustrates the conflict between the peasants and the current government:

¹⁷ 'Jornadas de desarrollo científicos' were a type of working days for scientific development which seek to develop in students and teachers an interest in science, technology and research. At the same time, they were oriented to find different alternatives to the problems that the country was facing at that time.

¹⁸ The political slogan of Daniel Ortega campaign is "Socialism, Christianity and Solidarity" with other slogans that reinforces his populism like '*El pueblo presidente*' which means 'people as president', among others.

Figure 4. Police repression toward the Peasant movement in Nueva Guinea



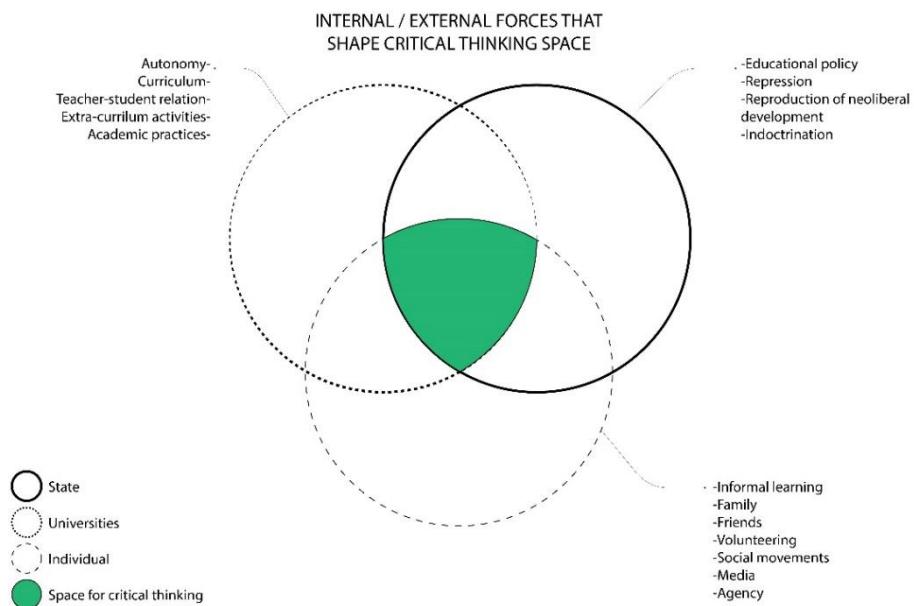
Source: Confidencial 2016

Under this scenario this research had the intention to analyze what is happening now inside universities and if there is still a remaining space for students to have critical education toward development as the Sandinistas tried to build in the past. In order to do so, the following section looks at student's narratives where they have identified different factors that may be shrinking and expanding the space for critical thinking.

4.2 Internal and External factors that shape the space for critical thinking

One of the main questions that were intended to explore during this research was how different factors shape the space for critical thinking about development inside the universities chosen. These factors were extracted from the analytical framework and were asked during the interviews to both groups of psychology at UCA and UNAN. However not all the factors considered previously were identify during the analysis of information. The following diagram illustrates which were the main factors that students, from both universities, recognize that could constrain or expand the space they have inside universities. Moreover, it is important to add that this factors/ forces are sometimes interrelated.

Figure 5. Factors that shape critical thinking space.



Source: Author's own diagram based on the results of the interviews.

Although these factors are not directly divided into 'internal' and 'external' in the diagram, it is important to clarify that internal factors correspond to the ones that shape critical thinking space inside the university whether external factors are the ones who shape this space external to the university as the state and the individual. In addition, even though the individual -or students -are not external to the learning process but embedded in it, they were represented in a circle as external factors for two reasons. First, the intention was to recognize the internal forces within students – apart from the university- that can shape the way students perceive development. Second, it was strategical to separate formal from informal learning so student's experiences outside the university can be taken into consideration since the critical literature review suggest that the learning process is also shaped by these experiences.

4.2.1 Internal Factors

Among the internal forces that most influence critical thinking spaces inside the university are: the curriculum, the student-teacher relation- the extra-curricular activities plus the academic practices.

Regarding the curriculum, the results from the interviews suggest that there are challenges to connect what students are learning with the main economic, social, economic and political needs of the country. First, none of the universities are providing much space to connect students with national development topics. For instance, when students were asked if they knew about the national development policy of Nicaragua the majority of students responded that they did not know about it. Even though some students were familiar with some programs as *HAMBRE 0*, *USUR40*, *PLAN TECNO*, among others, they cannot relate them with a broader development model. I

In addition, none of the careers at UCA nor UNAN have courses directed related to public policies, only students at UCA stated that they had studied one educational policy as part of one course. It was interesting that even it was not asked during the interview a lot of students spontaneously expressed the need for a more context oriented education, as one student stated:

“...they don't teach us how to analyze development but I think this is super necessary. In this country there is a big necessity since we have a frozen development and people have the right to know how to overcome this.” (Interview UNAN-7, 2017).

Therefore, these results suggest an ambiguity based on the role that higher education is supposed to achieve versus what it actually do in practice. For instance, the constitution of Nicaragua suggests in article 6 establishes that education should be link to national development so students can support the ‘productive process’ and the ‘objective needs’ of economic development base on popular interest’.

However, how can students meet those ‘objective needs’ if the curriculum is somehow disconnected from development debates and policy analysis? This reflection is also connected with the approach that the university had to education since formal learning is somehow disconnected from informal learning therefore students spent the majority of the time learning from inside the classroom. As a consequence, education is hard to link with ‘popular interest’ since it will imply students spending more time in the communities were those popular needs and interest are located. This resembles what critical pedagogy thinkers and de-colonial authors have argued against formal institutions. They all agreed universities should foster a moral commitment and a social justice approach to encourage students and professors to move from formal to informal sites of knowledge production as the *Sandinismo* was trying to do in the past following critical pedagogy approaches. As Giroux (2006) mentioned, education needs to enable political agency in students were students can use their educational experience to engage in active citizenship.

Furthermore, this challenge to connect students with the main needs of the country was already acknowledge by the ex -director of the humanity department at UCA ¹⁹ who reinforced the need to connect more students with national development , especially in psychology who has historically adopted a positivist framework that may not be responding to the real demands of the country. As she stated:

“UCA needs to rethink, debate, open spaces within students and teacher to evaluate what is the type of psychology that we are offering the students and society to consider if it is truly focus on responding to the needs of different sectors” (Secondary Interview 1, 2017).

¹⁹ Due to time constrain it was only possible to interview the ex- director of Humanities department of UCA, were the career of psychology is inserted. The interview suggest that important efforts have been done inside the department to foster a more critical approach toward what type of psychology does the country actually needs, however, there has been a lot of resistance among students and professors which could be interesting to analyze in futures researches.

Nevertheless, students also recognize other internal spaces that were important toward the construction of critical thinking as their academic/professional practices.²⁰ Both students, from UCA and UNAN, expressed how they are able to learn from others and link their studies with the needs of the people when they are at the schools or in other institutions doing their professional practices. This is perhaps one of the only spaces students have to learn from the world instead of only learning about it. (Esteve et al. 2009, Giroux 2006).

Another important internal factor that shapes directly the space for critical thinking is the relation teacher-student where the teaching-learning process is constructed. Students narratives indicates that this is the most important space to foster criticality. However, there were important differences among UCA and UNAN students regarding how they perceived the role of the teachers.

For instance, most UCA's students suggested that the courses were the most valued space since most²¹ of their teachers provided space for critical thinking. This was related to the way they structure their methodologies, the freedom they give students to express their viewpoint and the way some of the teachers connect national issues into the courses for a more practical application of the theory. As one student expressed:

“I like courses like psychology of education since we analyzed the educational policy of the government. The teacher Barbara Cerrato help us to question what is happening to the education inside the country. Also teachers like Juan Carlos are very open to dialogue and promote constant questioning and searching for more answers.” (UCA 3)

In contrast, at UNAN student shared different narratives. 4 out of 10 students considered that the majority of the teachers do not foster critical thinking. Hey considered that teachers usually repeat what the theory states without allowing them space to question it. Furthermore, there is a predominant vertical relationship inside the construction of knowledge where the teacher is the one ‘who possess valid knowledge’ and the student is consider a passive subject. For some students at UNAN their viewpoints are never taken into consideration.

This type of teacher-learning relation is what Freire (1970) suggested as the ‘Banking education’ where the students are ‘objects’ and not active subjects in the learning process. Therefore, the capacity to develop critical thinking is constraining since students are learning to repeat and memorize rather than using their previous and current knowledge to build their own viewpoints. The following quotes illustrate this point:

²⁰ These academic or professional practices are mandatory in UCA and UNAN. In UCA for example, each quarter of the academic calendar students go to different institutions to put in practice their knowledge like going to schools, NGOS, psychological clinic or to a company.

²¹ Some students pointed out that there are challenges regarding the teaching-learning process. They say that some teachers don't encourage them to express freely neither debate within the classrooms. However, these were exceptions since the majority did consider teacher foster critical thinking.

“... sometimes courses are too focus on theories and you cannot give your opinion. Is what the theory says, teacher do not tease us to question the theory. As a young student I don’t think my opinion is taken into consideration. Adults not always give the opportunity to express freely, my voice is being ignored.” (Interview UNAN- 5, 2017)

“Maybe teachers are barriers, until some extend, because they do not allow students to express themselves and they do not allow students to construct new ideas” (Interview UNAN- 3, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are important structural constraints in Nicaragua education that needs to be included in the analysis like the lack of teacher training which has been a problem inherited from the time of the revolution. (ENVIO 1986). Different organizations like CIASES (2016) or (FUNIDES 2017) have also argued for the little recognition and value that the teaching profession has in Nicaragua which translates into low salaries, few incentives to study the profession, lack of adequate infrastructure to teach, among other problems.

Finally, students considered as the second most important space to foster critical thinking extracurricular activities. These spaces are part of the social extension of the university where seminars, conferences, workshops, cultural activities, volunteering, among other spaces are organized. Students narratives suggest that these type of spaces are valued since they can express freely and have an interdisciplinary learning. The following quotes illustrate the value of these spaces for students:

“I think is a perfect space because people can express themselves as they want, music, theater, singing, etc. Even though the courses are another space, sometimes courses are too focus on theories and you cannot give your opinion.” (Interview UNAN 5-10, 2017)

“I like *Radio Universidad* since it allows students to engage in debates about social, economic and political issues. Mm another space that I value a lot is *Cultura UCA*, maybe because I am in I think it helps. For me it does foster critical thinking because through theater and singing we address social issues like gender and violence and after a performance for example we discuss a lot.” (Interview UCA-10, 2017).

Despite the fact that these spaces were important for critical thinking, in general they are not constant and at least in UCA they only promoted when the faculty is the organizer but there are still challenges to promote the importance of interdisciplinary learning to face complex social problems that demands the interrelated knowledge.

4.2.2. External Factors

Since universities are embedded in a broader social, economic and political dynamic, students also recognized different external factors that influence critical thinking regarding the role of the state and their own experiences outside the university.

For instance, when students were asked about the main external barrier that may constrain critical thinking their narratives pointed to the government as the main barrier. First, students suggested at different moments during the interview that there is no access to public information which is fundamental for students to construct different viewpoints. One student from UNAN stated:

“here the information is limited, is very hard to have access to real information. So I think that if people from a country do not have access to enough information and to real one, then it is easier for the government to fool them. If we want to develop Nicaragua we need to have more access” (Interview UNAN-7, 2017).

Second, there is a perception among UCA and UNAN’s student that the government of Nicaragua is repressive fostering political persecution toward any individual or group that differ from their policies and viewpoints. This corresponds with the claims of human right defenders and oppositions group as was stated in the historical background of the country - explained in chapter 1. The following quotes illustrate how this negative perception toward the government is perceived by both UNAN and UCA’s students.

“There is Fear to express their views in the majority of student. Repression too. they do not want to talk because they think they are stupid. Mm in the politic sphere too, because if you want to do a protest and raise your voice they will silence you. this fear causes self-censorship.” (Interview UNAN-9, 2017)

“This government is a limitation for critical thinking because they only give one perspective about everything. They are super repressive and when someone wants to protest they close all the spaces and they censor you. Among students there is too much polarization. (Interview UCA-4, 2017).

Some students from UCA also reflected on the influence of the government inside their learning experience and suggested that even though they are not directly affected by the government at UCA, it is a barrier since they don’t feel secure to do participate in social protest because the government is closing all the spaces using the police and even the army in their favor. The lack of democratic governance inside the country is a risk factor since it may constrain student agency to associate and act toward different social injustices happening inside the country. Nevertheless, some students at UCA expressed during the interviews they own participation in social protest which suggest that even within complex political contexts students are able to raise their voices.

Furthermore, there was a strong critique from both UCA and UNAN students to the educational model implemented by the government. As mentioned in the previous section students from both universities recognized important challenges among their universities to connect more their learnings with the actual needs of the country and to prioritize education as the Sandinista government did during the 80ths. For example, one student at UCA was claiming the lack of infrastructure and quality in the education. She expressed:

“The government is doing great when it comes to recreation but they do not invest anything in education. Student receives classes under a tree, setting in the floor sometimes and the teachers have super low payments. This is the biggest obstacle; we are depriving a country from its growth” (Interview UCA - 5, 20017)

In addition, students identified a reduction of autonomy specially at UNAN. This is paradoxical since UNAN has historically been defending autonomy at the university. Nevertheless, student's answers suggest corruption at internal levels inside the university were the Sandinista Party uses UNEN (student movement) to foster their political power.²² This corresponds to what different academics have claimed in different media. For instance, Tunnermann (La Prensa 2016), who was ex- direct of UNAN university, argued how the student movement is practically asleep and students are being manipulated by the government. This strong statement was supported the majority of UNAN's students since all agreed that UNEN constrains critical thinking and that inside the university there is no more autonomy but rather a strong intervention of the government. As one student expressed:

“There is no autonomy. I know that a lot of student specially from Medicine enter UNAN just because they are from the Sandinista Party... Politics interfere in here. Also in celebrations like the '19 de Julio' they had forced us to assist and some teachers lower our grades if we don't do it.” (Interview UNAN -5, 2017)

The following photo also illustrate the presence of the government inside the university were political propaganda is used to decorate informative walls at UNAN:

Figure 6. Sandinista Propaganda at UNAN



Source: Author's own.

²² Nevertheless, this cannot be affirming through the present study since more information will be needed to support the statement. Nevertheless, it was address since the study is based on student's perception which suggest that more researches will be needed for further analysis.

In contrast, most UCA students, expressed that there is autonomy. However, some students from UCA have doubts whether autonomy is being respected at UCA. Some students mentioned that UCA is part of the CNU and receives 6% of the national budget which may be conditioning the university to position itself as 'Neutral university'. They considered that even though the majority of teachers from psychology express freely their viewpoints this may be an exception since they know from other students that teachers avoid topics regarding the government intervention. Furthermore, some of the answers suggest that autonomy at UCA may be also in risk. One student expressed:

"I thought UCA had autonomy, however, the director of "Radio Universidad" was fired since she was addressing a topic that was very political related to the government. Where is the autonomy in this case? Just because she was engaging student in critical reflections about some governmental policies! However, no one wants to talk about it since we are living a very repressive regime where this is normal." (Interviewed UCA-9, 2017).

Overall, the government intervention at universities seems to be shrinking rather than expanding critical thinking space, reproducing their dominant ideology inside the system limiting universities autonomy. As Giroux stated, the global sphere -which in this case can be represented by the civic space inside universities - must be a place where "authority can be questioned, power held accountable and dissent seen as having a positive value". (Giroux 2006: 183).

Nevertheless, students also identified other external factors to the university -informal learning – that are important to foster critical thinking as social movements, volunteering, reading the media and conversations with their families where they are able to discuss in a safe environment national development issues.

On the other hand, student's narratives also reflect toward the role of informal learning on fostering critical thinking and action. This was inferred by an ambiguity in the answers of students, especially at UNAN since the way they conceptualize development do not correspond to their own viewpoints toward development in practice.

For instance, students were asked during the interviews to define development and to relate it with other concepts like equity, economic growth, modernity and poverty. Overall, UNAN students tended to have more difficulties on explaining development and linking it with other concepts; some students even rejected some of these questions during the interview. Meanwhile, the results suggest that UCA students have a more integral definition of development. Their answers suggest a strong reflection on the concept of development in relation to social justice perspective where they were able to problematize the positive and negative aspects of development. For example, when a student was asked about development and how it relates to modernity she stated:

" I think the concept of modernity has been wrongly used. I think that it is associated with technologies and big buildings but it does not pay enough attention to our environment. For example, Nicaragua depends on agriculture but

with the use of technology and modernity discourses we are deforesting the country and damaging our natural resources like water. Is this the price we have to pay for modernity? Ruin our ecosystem?” (Interview UCA-9, 2017)

In contrast, UNAN’s students expressed a more neoliberal vision of development framing modernity as the ‘natural path of development’ as one student expressed “Modernity is a symbol of progress and for me progress is equal to development” (UNAN 2). These type of answers were very common among students which reveals that the universities may not be contesting hegemonic discourses about development that are problematic since they reproduce historical systems of oppressions where other forms of development that are not part of the ‘dominant culture’ (Lander 2000) are excluded as the peasant movement fights over their land shows.

On the other hand, even though students from UNAN have strong differences about how they conceive development in relation to UCA, when they were asked to link development with the interoceanic canal project their answers were very contradictory adopting another positionality toward development in practice. Most of student from UNAN and UCA disagree with the project- UCA all of the student and in UNAN the majority. Among the main argument that they expressed were the lack of inclusive planning, since different sectors of the society were not taken into consideration, land expropriation were peasant have been the most affected, ecological damage, violation of human rights like the persecution and repression of the peasant movement by the government, among other reasons.

There was a critical approach toward development mark by a deep solidarity with the peasant movement and they struggle to derogue the canal law. Furthermore, when they were asked how they constructed those viewpoints the majority of students did not mention the university and instead they learned more about this topic through informal learning. As one student expressed:

“. I see the faces of the peasant and I felt really bad. I am very sensitive and I even cried when I saw the protest of the peasant. There was old woman sick but still fighting for their rights. I have supported the protest by collecting money to cook and to give them water since the government repress the protest and a lot of them got affected.” (Interview UCA -6, 2017)

There is an ambiguity in the results since it could be expected that UNAN students will be in favor of the canal since their answers suggested a more neoliberal inclination toward development but instead their answers suggest a deep solidarity toward the people who are being oppressed by the canal construction adopting social justice approaches to the way development is conceived.

Finally, there research also shows that there is an ambiguous role of the students toward development where they don’t not recognize themselves as important ‘present actors’ in the development of their country. Instead they consider that they will ‘become’ important actors once they got inserted in the labor force. As one student from UNAN explained:

“Yes, I am an actor since I am studying and later with my work I will support the development of my country. (Interview UNAN -2, 2017)”

Different authors as Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008) –further explanations in chapter 2- had argued that under neoliberalism students are commonly framed as passive actors who just need to gain skills and knowledge to be part of the work-force to ‘become’ productive members of a society. Therefore, this type of answer may correspond to the influence of neoliberalism as a global force that may be influencing directly or indirectly student’s agency toward developments.

To conclude this section, is important to highlight that there are some factors that were not directly express during the interviews but that could be infer from student’s narratives as the clear neoliberal model of development that the state is reinforcing among universities. This framing of education also impact the space student have for critical thinking, specially students from public universities.

The following section will elaborate more on how these factors combined with a broader socio political and historical context reflects on three main findings.

4.3. Shrinking Spaces

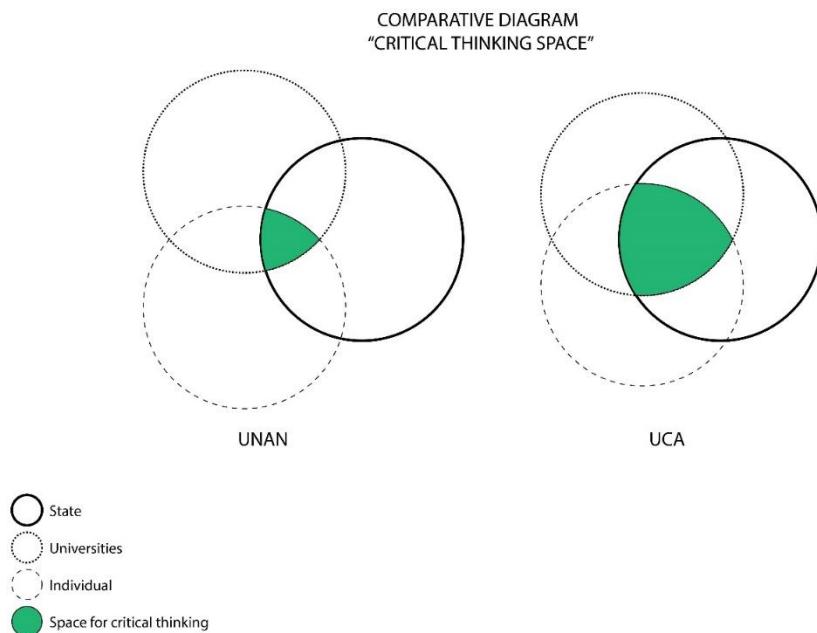
As stated in the introduction of this chapter, universities in Nicaragua -under the Sandinista ideology of the 80ths- adopted an educational model that promoted some space for critical pedagogy approaches toward education where different efforts were done to link formal with informal learning through the curriculum and extracurricular activities. The Sandinista ideology was oriented to construct a pedagogy that can contest hegemonic visions of development and progress which was especially relevant in a country like Nicaragua who historically had suffered repeated interventions and aggressions in the name of development.

However, the results of the interviews suggest a radical shift characterized by a constrain role of the state which instead of fostering critical thinking is reducing, specially toward public university. This results may be associated to the reduction of autonomy inside UNAN, a predominant banking education plus antidemocratic practices outside the university which students perceived as barriers for the construction of critical thinking.

4.3. Shifting roles between private and public universities

The second main finding reveals a paradoxical shift between UCA and UNAN university where UNAN has a more reduced space to foster critical thinking in comparison to UCA. This space is not only physical but it can also be abstract since it is related to different internal and external barriers that limit the possibility students have inside the university to construct their own meaning, develop interpretive strategies and criteria for producing and consuming knowledge as well as freedom of expression. The diagram below illustrates the reduction of critical thinking space:

Figure 7. Reduction of critical thinking spaces at UCA and UNAN



Source: Author's own elaboration based on the results of the interviews.

Critical thinking space is represented in the middle, highlighted in green, as the result of multiple forces²³ regarding the individual, the state and the university. In the case of UNAN this space is smaller since students identify more internal and external barriers that reduce critical thinking space toward development than UCA. The main barriers already addressed in the previous section were: Curriculum, teacher-student relation and the reduction of autonomy due to a strong state intervention. Each barrier corresponds to one of the three circles.

This represents an interesting historical shift since it could be expected that UNAN fosters a more critical pedagogy instead of constraining it due to the historical origins of it and the socio economic and educational background of students.

UNAN was the first public university oriented to include students from lower class. It promoted students political and social participation as stated in the first section of this chapter. In contrast , UCA was funded by Jesuits as a private university for middle-high and high class families24. (Secondary Interview – 2, 2017).

²³ The forces mentioned below make reference to the internal and external factors previously discussed that may be reducing the space for critical thinking inside UNAN.

²⁴ According to secondary interviews done to the director of IDEUCA , UCA was founded as a private university lead by Jesuit to provide higher education to the sons and daughters of Somoza's family and friends. It was conceiving as university from middle high to high class students. However, after the revolution, It joined the CNU (National Council of Universities) under the condition to be more inclusive and incorporate a more diverse range of students.

Furthermore, UNAN's educational model has adopted the 'Sandinista ideology' which was grounded on some Marxist visions which are present through the different paintings found in the walls of the university. Their content reflects the class struggle of the proletariat to defeat the bourgeoisie in the Nicaragua context ²⁵ during the revolution and other social events in the history of the country like the 6% fights organized by the student movement . The photos bellow illustrates the environment at UNAN:

Figure 8. Memories of the revolution at UNAN walls



Source: Author's own.

Nevertheless, the students from UNAN adopted a more conservative vision toward development in relation to UCA's students who adopted a more critical approach to development and social justice while they were interviewed- this point was already explained in the las section.

²⁵ In the Nicaraguan history this struggles are represented by the Sandinista Revolution were Somoza and his allies represented the bourgeoisie who reinforced the social division of classes by oppressing and excluding minorities.

Figure 9. Memories of the 6 % fights at UNAN walls.



Source: Author's own

4.4. Informal learning contributions to critical pedagogy

One of the intentions of this research was to analyze critical thinking spaces inside universities to reflect whether universities are fostering or constraining a plurality of visons toward development. The focus on 'development' was fundamental since different authors from critical pedagogy and de colonial approaches have been warning on the multiples forms of oppression that historically the university has been reproducing by adopting a positivist epistemology, leaving behind other forms of knowing. However, the results suggest that even though the university is an important site to forge critical thinking it is not the only place where student can construct different viewpoints toward development.

Student's narratives suggest that social movements play a fundamental role on fostering critical thinking toward development in practice. Students were able to debate and engage with 'development topics' by observing how in Nicaragua the peasant movement was being repressed by the government. This awakened values of solidarity and empathy which allowed them to contest the knowledge production behind development. According to different students, the canal project has shaped their viewpoints toward development and they have been debating about it with their families, friends and classmates in other 'spaces' where they can express and take actions toward it. This is sites of informal learning are fundamental, especially in cases where the university has less autonomy to promote critical views of development if they are against the ideology of the government – UNAN case.

Finally, these findings are inserted in global discussions toward development, youth and education that will be presented in the next chapter. It is important to remind that the focus of this research was to understand how universities were fostering or constraining critical thinking spaces toward development from a micro level analysis since it used student's narratives as the main method to explore the research problem. However, there are other global factors that

also affect critical thinking spaces that were out of the scope of this research paper.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

In Nicaragua, the main findings of the research suggest that universities do have a transformative power but they need to overcome structural challenges in order to provide students a critical learning experience. Some of these challenges are not internal to the university but also external to it.

First, student's narratives suggested that there is a shrinking space for critical thinking at UNAN which reflects on the need to safeguard the autonomy of the university and its main function as an institution oriented to produce knowledge that can be useful for the development of the country. The reduction of autonomy at the university affects student's learning process by constraining a more critical education. It is directly related to the role of the state and open the question whether democratic principles are being respected or not. However, this study is based on a micro-level analysis of the political economy of education, therefore further researches will be needed to analyze why autonomy has been reduced at universities and how it reflects on the changing role of the state.

On the other hand, this study reveals different shifts among public and private universities in relation to critical thinking spaces. Student's narratives suggest that UNAN ideology has been changing over the time from a socialist discourse to a more conservative positionality influencing student's learnings. However, there is a need for further researches to understand why public universities may be reproducing a more conservative learning and to what extend does neoliberalism may be influencing higher education since student's narratives suggest a more human capital approach to education at UNAN.

Furthermore, special attention should be paid on the way development is framed inside and outside educational institutions. Universities have the social/moral responsibility to question what type of knowledge production about development is more oriented to reduce inequalities and oppressions. Therefore, the educational model inside universities should connect more students with national development issues not only theoretically but also in practice.

Learning as an integral process should transcend formal institutions and provide spaces so students can develop their own viewpoints through theory and practice, action and reflection as universities tried to do in the 80s. Using the words of Xavier Gorosteaga, ex- rector of UCA university:

"We believe that one of the potential places where alternative thinking and proposals can be produced is the University. What is at stake is this possibility of consolidating a center of thought, a national platform for study and pragmatic proposals, a platform to create consensus from a new, democratic perspective, at the same time as the new generation of Nicaraguans is formed in a constructive and non-polarized environment." (ENVIO 1992).

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi- Structure Interviews

I. **Objetive**

The objective of the interview is to know student's perception about how different university settings influence the development of a critical thinking toward national development issues. There are no good or bad answers since it is based on a subjective experience and they can either answer all the questions or stop whenever they don't feel comfortable.

II. **General Information**

- Chronological Age: _____
- University: _____
- Starting Career year: _____
- Course: _____
- Years of study: _____
- Country and city where you were born: _____
- Gender: _____

III. **Socio Economic and educational background**

- Where do you currently live? is it urban or rural place?
- Did you go to a private or a public school?
- What is the educational level of your parents?
- Did you receive any grant for you current or previous studies? If not, how are you paying your studies?
- What did your parent do for living?
- Do you work?

IV. **Current Education**

- Why did you study this career?
- Why did you choose this university?
- What is learning for your you? Where does learning takes place?

V. **Development and Critical Thinking**

- a) *What do you understand by development? Or, what is development for you?*
 - Do you find a link between development and equality? Or, should people be equal?
 - Is development similar to progress or economic growth?
 - How does development relate to poverty?
 - How does modernity relates to development?

- b) *Where does it takes place?*

- What are key actors in development for you?
- How does development relate to forms of participation?
- Do you consider yourself an important factor in development? (role of the state, citizen, private sector, international organizations, etc.)
- What are the international limits of development? Where do you consider it should take place?
- Does the university reinforce a particular type of development model? Do you agree with it?

VI. Critical Thinking Mechanisms

- a) *What is critical thinking for you?*
 - *What is not critical thinking?*
- b) *How and where does critical thinking take place?*
 - *How the following educational spaces affect critical thinking?*
 - ✓ Curriculum
 - ✓ Teachers (relation teacher-student, methodology, affection, etc.)
 - ✓ Alternatives learning spaces inside university (seminars, volunteering, student movements, etc.)
 - ✓ Researches
 - ✓ Classmate
 - *Can critical thinking be constructed outside the university?*

VII. Barriers

- a) *What barriers do you identify in the construction of critical views about development? Or Do you identify any social, political, economic or cultural factor that constrain critical thinking?*
- b) *Do you recognize any internal barrier inside your university?*
 - Do student organization such as UNEN for you foster critical thinking space or constrain it?
 - Does the educational academic level of the teachers affect negatively critical thinking?
 - Is bureaucracy inside the university a barrier?
 - Can you express freely?
- c) *Do you recognize any external barrier?*
 - How much does the state influence critical thinking? (indoctrination in curriculum, intervention in activities, lack of freedom of expression, etc.)
 - How much autonomy do you consider your university has?
 - Do you consider that the influence of family beliefs can constrain critical thinking about development?

VIII. The interoceanic Canal Project

- a) *Have you ever discussed national development projects inside your university?*
 - *Can you give me one example?*
 - Do you consider necessary to address this topic inside your educational formation?
- b) *How does the interoceanic canal, for example, has been address inside your university?*
 - Have you ever discussed the canal inside the classroom?
 - Did your university organized debates or discussions around the canal? who participated?
 - How does it relate to development?
 - What is your viewpoint of the project? How did you construct those viewpoints?

IX. Future Challenges

- a) *How do you imagine a critical education should be?*
 - Do you consider the university is fostering or constraining spaces for critical thinking?
 - Have you experienced important changes in the space provided inside your university for critical thinking in the past years?
 - Is it possible to have a more critical education in the country? What do you think is needed?