

THE STUDENT'S VOICE

An Interview of Janaína Garcia Gonçalves



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Can you please introduce yourself to the readers?

My name is Janaína Garcia Gonçalves. I am a fifth year medical student from Londrina in the state of Paraná, Brazil. I am 21 years old. I was not born in Paraná but in the state of Minas Gerais, about 1000 km from Londrina.

In what kind of town did you grow up?

I am from the country, not a very developed region, but when I was 16 years old I went out to study in the Capital of our state.

16. Was that because your parents moved out?

No, it was because of my school. I could have finished school in my city but I wanted to become a doctor. The examinations to enter the University course of Medicine are really hard and I needed to prepare myself as well as possible.

How do you look back on that decision?

Being a doctor runs in my family. I have two uncles who are doctors and my godmother is also a doctor. I remember that when I was 5 years old I wanted to be a doctor, I never thought about anything else.

But the doctors in my family are all surgeons! So when I started University I thought that I would become a neurosurgeon.

And how do you feel about that now?

Now it has changed completely. Sometimes I think I'm going to do Internal Medicine, then I think I'm going to become a General Practitioner and at other

times I intend to do Nephrology. I am not completely clear about this. I'm going to start the internships now, in December. In my school we have 2 years of internship. And I need to see. . . I am only sure that I am not going to be a surgeon! The competition is so high that you don't have a high quality of life. I see my relatives, they are so stressed many times that I don't want this kind of life for me!

So the quality of your own life is an important factor in that decision?

Yes. In general I see that surgeons are so stressed, so competitive, they need to prove all the time they are better than the others. . .

So, it was since you were very young that you started to dream about being a doctor. Did it take you much trouble to get into medical school?

No, because I started so young. I always liked to prepare myself and my father and my mother stimulated me to realise my dreams. In my high school I could focus on what was necessary to do medicine. I studied hard for the examination. Each school has its own examination and I focused on Londrina. There was a lot of competition: 140 students for one place!

So you must be very bright!

No, I think I am not so bright, but fortunate! I think I am lucky to have parents who stimulated me. I have had conditions that made it easier to go to University!

Did you choose Londrina because you were in Paraná already, or for other reasons?

No, for different reasons. My cousin's girlfriend lived there. I could stay in her home and do the examinations for Londrina. And even then I didn't know it had the PBL-system! I didn't know anything about the University. When I prepared for my examination I didn't go to school, I studied by myself, with some private teachers. So I liked to study alone and take my questions to the teachers.

Is the Problem-Based Learning-system in Londrina very different from the school that you went to before that?

Yes! [Here a broad smile appears.] High school is 10 years of listening to the teacher and preparing for the examination! You are not taught to think about the things you are learning. That is why I think it is difficult for me and my colleagues to get used to the PBL-methodology. You are not used to thinking. We needed to be stimulated a lot to think by ourselves.

So how did you cope with that first year of PBL then?

I can say that I didn't suffer a lot because I had studied by myself already. And I like challenges. Everything was new, the city, the University. . .

But PBL relies very much on working in groups...

That was of course a dramatic change, but it was good to experience because it made my friends and me really close. You need to live through this together, to support each other.

I appreciate that you needed to do that, but how did you feel about that?

Well, there was one thing that made it more difficult: the tutors. Of course there are great tutors in my University, but there are some that didn't contribute to the group work. These tutors started to induce a feeling of competition between the students. Of course we tried to solve this and we organized training for these tutors. It was also new for these tutors, we were the third year with this educational system. But I think it is going to be better. What is needed is to avoid competition but rather to stimulate the sharing of knowledge between the group members.

Were you able as a student to feed that back to the tutors?

In my first year we organized a forum to evaluate the assessment and the teaching of practical skills. We gave the feedback to the Educational Board of our course. There is one student per year on the board.

And is that enough?

Yeh!

Are your comments taken seriously?

In Londrina we have a close relationship with everybody, with the Dean and with the Board. They really want our opinion about what should be changed. Only, the changes didn't happen as fast as we would like! But at least they listened to our complaints and they told us: if you want us to listen to your complaints, please write it down. Talking in the corridor is not going to help us!

We made a document and the Board changed especially the formative assessment.

Last year, we have taken out the self-evaluation, because we were not critical about ourselves; the self-interest is big. In general, students think that if you don't give a good score to your friends, you will damage their final score.

We also have a student organization. All students can be a member. This year we will co-organize another forum together with the Educational Board. I think it will be really good, because it involves all the teachers, also the teachers who have not been so good until now. We had the first students who have graduated from the PBL-system, and of course they noted our deficiencies in the internships. Since my first year there wasn't any other official forum.

Do you feel that you have the same enthusiasm for PBL that you had in the first year?

No. I still like the curriculum and the theory behind PBL a lot because I like the opportunity to go to the teacher. The problem that you start to see is that the teachers weren't so involved in the new methodology. And there are some things that aren't so good. For example: practical skills. Until now we haven't had a structured programme. Each week we would go and hear, then and there: "you are going to have this procedure". It was not so organized. But now, our friends in the first and second year tell us it has changed a lot. For us it wasn't so well. But I learned other things; it didn't work well and I looked for help outside. I think it developed my sense of self-confidence. I looked for mentors. There are a lot of teachers who want to help you, if you only ask. We have a lot of time available to study for the modules and to do these kinds of outreach activities. I have a lot of friends at traditional universities. I don't know if they learn more in their curriculum. The only thing I can say is that the quality of their lives suffers. They complain a lot, that they need to study all day and when they are at home they need to continue to study because only then they will understand better what the teacher was talking about. In contrast, I have a lot of time available for studying, for doing gymnastics, to have a good life. Of course I study a lot, the tutorial group is not easy, but I feel that it is not the examination we prepare for; we prepare for life. I think this change of concept was a good thing because in high school you always study only for an examination. Creativity is killed there. I may not be as enthusiastic as in the first year but in my faculty I am the person who will defend PBL until death. The methodology is really good to motivate us to think, to motivate us to think by ourselves. The problems we experience are in the infrastructure.

Do you think most students feel like you?

Yes, I think it has changed. In the first year almost all students didn't like PBL. Insecure, yes. Now they feel that they are learning and they feel less insecure, I think. If they don't like it at least they accept it well.

Where did the community come into the curriculum?

We go into the community from the first year. But the community in Londrina is a difficult one. Our intervention in the community is that we go there and we just observe. In my first year, we chose to work with a school. And so I gave classes about health to small children, 9 years old. It was good for us because it was a multiprofessional thing: physiotherapy, nursing, pharmacy etc. We were not really prepared for this. The group was very nice and it was good to work that way. But we didn't like to go to the community. We thought: "My God, we studied so well and now they are sending us to the community, a very violent place." We didn't feel that we

were doing something that could change the community. We only went to collect our study-hours and we were not influencing the community at all. It did not feel relevant enough. Looking back I think it was, but at that time I did not think it made a difference to that school. At the end we noted that the school children felt good about our presentations.

In my second year I did a field-research project in the community together with only nursing students. We worked with pregnant teenagers. We asked why they had become pregnant. We expected that that was because they didn't know about contraception. We found out that they knew very well how to avoid a pregnancy but because of their socio-economic circumstances they chose to become pregnant. They wanted a husband. I was surprised.

In the third year I did another study. That one I really didn't like, because we didn't know what to do. We had many meetings and couldn't decide what to do. In the end we were very rushed.

In the fourth year we also didn't know what to do. Originally they thought to put the students into primary care units to measure blood pressure, but it didn't work because the doctors in the primary care are not from the University. They had a lot of students and they didn't know what to do with them. They didn't have time to give assistance. Later they put the students of my class into our ambulatory clinics and I think that has worked. In some cases we could help with physical examination. Of course we depended on teachers, but we looked for those who wanted students. That way we could discuss the cases with the teachers.

I have liked these experiences, especially in the first and fourth years. It was the first time I could really observe practice. It was an excellent preparation for the clerkships. We are more mature now, but it also had to do with the availability of supervision and guidelines.

And the multiprofessional experiences?

Well, we complained a lot about each other, but I think it helped to avoid the stereotypes in the future: "Oh, you're so cool, you don't look like a doctor at all!".

What did you appreciate most in your curriculum so far?

The communication skills and how to deal with the patients. In all aspects. Skills training is good, you learn how to deal with different aspects. But in reality you learn to deal with real people with real problems!

And I liked the tutorial groups and conferences. We needed tutors to give us clues, hints. They helped us to organize our knowledge.

What would you change if you were the Dean of the Faculty?

I would like to improve the way the teachers are involved in the curriculum. I would like to increase their commitment. Fortunately nowadays it is changing, they start to become more involved.

Why is that?

They see students in the internships. They see what they ought to have taught us, and now they do.

About your further career, what kind of doctor do you see yourself to be in a few years?

My friends see me continue to be involved in the University, because of my interest in education. Internal Medicine..., going abroad..., after that I don't know.

If you continue to be involved in the University you are restricted to places where a University is around, not a rural place. How would you like that?

I don't know. I like the remote health care, too. I like the contact with patients, that's my problem. So it is not so clear for me. I really can't tell you. Maybe the combination.

You have been the Secretary-General of the Student Network Organization. How did you like that?

SNO has been a very good experience. I have noticed a similarity between my work at the medical school in Londrina and at an international level with the SNO. Internationally we could only communicate by e-mail. I was troubled by not receiving answers. I learned to stay quiet. Some people were not committed with SNO, which is also the case locally in Londrina. At the Network conferences, we have all the facilities, but back home it is difficult to keep the fire burning.

Something I am very happy with is the mentorship programme. I am really grateful to see that we can do things. But it was just a little! I am usually very dynamic. I am not used to such an organization. I started to get worried: we could have done so much and we only laid the base. But I am sure that we can get really good sessions here in the future!

It will be really easier for the next SNO group to work. We will continue to be committed. One of the difficulties in the SNO is the rapid turnover. I would like to continue to be involved in the Network: TUFH. Not only am I interested in PBL but also in Community-Based Education. There are many similarities and many differences between Londrina and other places in the world. The Network: TUFH gives you the opportunity to learn so much. This is so interesting! Especially the interaction and exchanges in the conferences: this is definitely something that we must keep!

Do you have a final thought to share with us?

I would like to thank Sandra McCollum. She has been a special friend last year, and together with Art Kaufman and David Bor she has been very supportive to

us. That way we could develop our motivation to become a committed team. And that is the way I feel: if you work you need to give your best.

Thank you very much Janaína!