Chapter 9

Redrawing the Boundaries in Online Education through Media Literacy, OER, and Web 2.0: An Experience from Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents lessons learnt after reflecting on a distance learning course based on Web 2.0 tools, which was promoted in order to teach visual communication concepts to students on a teaching degree programme at a Federal University in Brazil (UFTM, Minas Gerais State). The authors assessed the potential of open learning to bring changes in education to the new generations of teachers, in pace with cultural transformations induced by the emergence of a digital culture. The course was structured in four modules: About visual language; Elements of visual communication; Design and style and Non-verbal text coding and decoding. The exercises in each one of the four modules mixed resources of a variety of sources, but all of them had in common the fact that they were open, free to use, and available to the general public. Results suggest that this is a productive approach to introduce new subjects into traditional curricula, but it forces educators to rethink established uses, particularly those related to assessment.

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INTRODUCTION

Social networks, Web 2.0 tools, convergence culture, and media literacy skills are some of the expressions that are gaining ground within educational discourses. At the same time, there is great controversy surrounding new media, convergence culture and its relationship with traditional education processes, such as teaching degrees. In those general settings, a group of teachers from the Federal University of Triangulo Mineiro (UFTM) decided to assess the potential of open learning and its range of tools to bring effective changes to the education of newer generations of teachers, thus attempting to keep pace with cultural transformations induced by the emergence of a digital culture.

In this context, the positions of who traditionally sends and receives information, of who learns and who teaches, and which party controls and which is controlled are weakened in classical educational models, which were unable to foresee the radical changes that have occurred in recent years. Such an unpredictable process has been intensifying conflicts in the classroom, raising difficulties to the daily work of teachers and deepening the lack of interest of the students at schools.

That process, however, should not be merely seen as a problem, but as a driving force for change: basic education definitively needs to rethink its goals and practices, if it is expected to be carried out according to the trends of contemporary culture.

While it is not easy to transform structures, beliefs and routines that have stood the test of time in the classroom, at least some effort could be made in order to connect traditional educational platforms to those now emerging in the digital age. The dialogue with the languages and cultural practices of the digital world may contribute significantly to modify some anachronistic features of Brazilian schooling. Thus the focal-points of this experience are the reading and writing practices which have been altered as a consequence of the impact of the greater social developments that have taken place in the economy, technology and culture, and consequently have directly affected people’s jobs, daily life, and education. Our hypothesis is that open and collaborative learning initiatives that take place alongside traditional classes could be productive to update practices that do not meet some of the current perceived contemporary needs of learning.

In some parts of the world, this strictly educational perspective may be mixed with social concerns. In Brazil, a country where only about a quarter of youths aged 18 to 24 go to college, the challenge of such pedagogical renovation goes hand in hand with the need for making access to university more widespread as well as increasing the number of teacher learners.

Collaborative learning, in this scenario, could also be an important resource for ensuring the success of a governmental programme for university access, which has been implemented in Brazil since 2003. This policy has increased the number of cities served by public universities (where the students pay no tuition fees) from 114 before 2003, to 237 in 2011. During this period 14 new universities were founded in Brazil with more than a hundred campuses spread over the country.

Proposing innovative education models to attract new students, particularly from social backgrounds often excluded from college, and to assure that they finish the graduate course was one of the requirements for joining the “Programme of Support for Plans of Restructuring and Expanding Federal Universities” (REUNI). The REUNI programme was planned to increase the number of Federal university students by 20% and is delivered by all Brazilian Federal Universities.

At UFTM, the first courses offered within the REUNI Programme were devoted to teacher education in six fields of expertise: Biology, Physics, Geography, History, Chemistry and Mathematics. One of the underlying principles of the programme is academic curriculum restructuring. These teacher education courses were created by
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