

A COMPLEX BLENDED DISCIPLINE OFFERED AS PART OF A TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSE BASED ON A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper aims at reporting the experience, assessing the results, and interpreting the educational implications of offering a complex blended discipline as part of a university English Language Course that has a traditional orientation. The mentioned discipline was taught by a teacher/designer who, grounded on the complex educational design, coped with the institution's requirements to achieve the students' needs, expectations, and interests, as well as with the goals of the subject. Among the educational repercussions presented, the findings of this pilot study open up the discussion as to what extent it is worthwhile to include a complex discipline in a traditional curriculum.

Introduction

Many arguments have been applied to elicit the urgent need to evolve from the established to the emerging educational paradigm. As stated by Moraes (1997, 2008), the established paradigm — known as *Cartesian-Newtonian* or *traditional* — has been gradually revealing its weakness to provide suitable responses to the contemporary issues of a continuously changing world. This epistemological fragility may be attributed to its linear, fragmented, and disciplinary pattern of perceiving and dealing with knowledge that is sequentially and orderly constructed. From this perspective, the act of knowing is often reduced to a cause-effect relationship so that its results are objective, measurable, and generalizable, the mere sum of its constituent parts. Such a simple-minded view engenders reduction, disjunction, and a polar perception of reality.

The emerging paradigm — the *complex paradigm* —, claimed the need of a *complex thought*, understood by Morin (2005, 2008a, 2008b) as a way of thinking which is grounded on three epistemological bases: *complexity* that denies reduction and emphasizes recursivity; *instability* that contradicts stability and stresses non-totality, non-completeness; and *intersubjectivity* that refuses knowledge as a unilateral construct objectively perceived. As a result of such a focus on reality, these complex lenses:

- Provide unique possibilities to integrate *subject* and *object* which were paradigmatically separated;
- Establish a valid complementary dialogue between opposite constructs;

Conceive of a simultaneous relationship between *single* and *multiple*;

- Envision a non-conclusive totality in which the whole is at the same time more and less than the sum of its constituent parts;
- Substitute the linear causality for circularity, based on the notion that effects may act back on causes, as well as feed them back;
- Experience non-fragmented knowledge and perceive the network in which it is transdisciplinarily constructed;
- Provide awareness that systems are instable and autopoietic; and
- Recognize the need to naturally deal with disorder, uncertainty, unpredictability, and ambiguity (Freire, 2011, p.272, based on Morin, 2005, 2008a, 2008b).

The features presented so far illustrate the development the complex paradigm represents if confronted with the traditional one. The pattern of reference now available is made of three interwoven principles that, according to Morin (2005, p.72-77), not only clarify but also operationalize the complex thought: the first, *the dialogical principle*, allows a confrontation between opposite but complementary concepts; the second, *the recursive principle*, establishes a circular, retroactive interconnection between cause and effect; and the third, *the hologrammatical principle*, refers to the relationship between the whole and its parts, asserting that each part reflects the whole as the whole reflects each part, similarly in a hologram.

Although the complex paradigm has been characterized and recognized lately, it is not widely settled down yet. It is more adequate to state that we have been living a transition phase, for the traditional paradigm is still prominent in many contexts whereas the complex one is emerging in many others. This seems to be the resulting scenario if one confronts social and educational settings nowadays.

Social settings seem to be somehow more flexible and sensitive to changes, since they assimilate evolutions much easily. Complex thought has been adopted by society and become integrated into personnel and organizational company development, as well as provided the business field with unique orientation and management reference patterns (Mariotti, 2010). School settings, in contrast, seem to be more traditional and rigid to changes of any sort. They tend to preserve practices, methodologies, and materials; any act of transforming tends to be the result of top-down, long-term discussions that reach teachers and students with few or no kind of special preparation. In general, when such a transformation comes to practice it is no rare kind of obsolete — at least, in the Brazilian context.

The research this paper presents emerges in such a controversial scenario in which traditional and complex are respectively living and emerging somehow together. This study aims at reporting the experience, assessing the results, and interpreting the educational implications of offering a complex blended

discipline as part of a university English Language Course that has a traditional orientation. The mentioned discipline was taught by a teacher/designer who grounded on the *complex educational design* (Freire, forthcoming) cope with the institution's requirements to achieve the students' needs, expectations, and interests, as well as with the goals of the subject. Among the educational repercussions presented, the findings of this pilot study open up the discussion as to what extent it is worthwhile to include a complex discipline in a traditional curriculum. Considering the current paradigmatic ambiguous scenario, this discussion assumes pivotal educational relevance.

The Report of an Experience

The blended discipline on focus in this study — *Language & Internet* — is part of the second semester of the English Language Course of a prestigious university in the city of São Paulo (Brazil). Involved in the transformations required by the Ministry of Education, the institutional commission in charge of the curricular review came to the conclusion that, by providing students with online experiences and technological expertise they could be better prepared for their future professional careers. Blended disciplines were therefore included in the regular Language Course curriculum in 2006, with the status, the same course load (40 hours), and all requirements of all the disciplines of the course.

Language & Internet seeks to develop written comprehension and text production related to information and facts available on the Internet. According to its original Course Plan, students are expected to reflect upon the English language as a tool of interaction and communication to understand the world, the others, and their relationships in the Internet context; as well as to conceive of this foreign language as a social, historical, cultural, political, and ideological phenomenon within the web environment.

Students are basically supposed to read, write and do research on the web. The syllabus of this blended discipline comprises reading strategies, levels of reading comprehension, distinction and characterization of texts and hypertexts, perception of distinct ways of conveying meaning in various interfaces, contrasts between printed and online materials, and various text productions. In addition to these contents, the study of a series of linguistic components (e.g., verb tenses, sentences and phrases; comparative, argumentative, and evaluative structures; among others) is also planned and expected, although it should be implicitly addressed, aiming at grammar internalization.

These general objectives were established when the blended disciplines were included in the Language Course curriculum, and when Moodle was selected as the online learning environment to host these disciplines. Their first design was presented as having a social interactionist orientation (Vygotsky, 1998), conveying the general idea of knowledge construction through social interaction. Considering such a theoretical foundation, readings, reflections and linguistic activities — either the ones that require individual feedback or

the ones that have a ready-made response — tended to be associated to forum discussions.

The initial design, however, has been changing throughout time, according to the students' reactions and to the teachers in charge of the discipline. Semester after semester, modifications of various sorts have been made, and the discipline, although attempting to reach the initial objectives, ended up having no cohesive theoretical foundation and very few of its primary configurations.

After some semesters and transformations in which the online novelty has become quite familiar, the complaints began. On the one hand, the students criticized the nature of the activities (readings followed by comprehension questions and structural exercises), the short deadline to accomplish these activities (one week, in general), the amount of forum discussions with compulsory participation, the *absence* and *silence* of the teachers, and finally, a perceived lack of relevance of the blended disciplines and of the relationship between them and the face-to-face ones attended in the same semester. These were serious complaints that must be taken into account urgently.

On the other hand, teachers also regretted what has started to be known and referred to as “*the Moodle courses.*” They felt overloaded by the short deadlines and consequently by the amount of activities for feedback and forum discussions to mediate almost every week. In fact, they were responsible for more than one blended discipline every semester, including at least 30 students per group. Any feedback delay meant more work to do later and therefore more well founded complaints from the students. Teachers' routine became an endless vicious circle: the more they did, the more they had to do and the more they had to ask their students to do because they were dealing with ready-made courses designed according to what may be labeled a *deliver-receive-correct-deliver* pattern. Having such a heavy workload every single week, they have no time to do the necessary adjustments to also comply with the students' needs and expectations.

I could feel such a situation by teaching this blended discipline several times and attempting to implement modifications in order to reach the institution's requirements and particularly the students' needs and expectations. However, I also felt compelled to consider my own representations, needs, and expectations as a participant in the process of knowledge construction, as well as the theories I was studying at that time. Involved in such a recognized complex situation and looking for a urgent solution, I came up with the *complex educational design* (Freire, forthcoming), which provided the answers I was seeking to *complexify* the blended discipline on focus, *Language & Internet*, and resolve part of the issues the students and teachers have been complaining about, as explained in the following section.

Complexifying a Blended Discipline

The *complex educational design* (CED) is conceived of as three inseparably interconnected components — *preparation, execution, reflection* — that attempt

to manage the predictable phases of a course design, keeping in mind that unpredictability always remains in its peripheral surroundings. The CED starting point — *preparation* — accounts from the preliminary details and initial decisions of any sort to the very first draft of course contents and materials. *Preparation* constitutes, therefore, the initial phase in which the teacher/designer establishes the basis and elaborates the backbone of the course to start negotiating it afterwards, in the following stage.

The second stage — *execution* — corresponds to the moment in which the course is inserted into the learning environment and made available on the web; when it starts to be collaboratively developed by the teacher and students; and when it actually starts to be managed. Although this stage comes after *preparation*, both stages maintain a very close interconnection that induces the teacher/designer to go back and forth before making specific decisions or solving certain disruptions or unexpected situations.

The last stage — *reflection* — involves not only the assessment process that permeates the course but also the critical reflective thinking developed by the teacher/designer who wants to interpret the course, learn from this experience, and prepare him/herself for future complex courses. This stage is also connected to the preceding one for *evaluation* and *reflection* have interwoven features that are necessary to make decisions at the *execution* level.

Having a design pattern to guide me, I started to consider the blended discipline to redesign. My very first finding was that it was impossible to *redesign, to design again* a discipline from a complex perspective, but I have to conceive of it from a fresh viewpoint: this perspective should be open to connections and reconnections in various ways so that knowledge could be constructed circularly, recursively, retroactively, establishing a dialogue between previous and recent constructs, as well as between opposite but complementary concepts, displaying a reflexive relationship between the whole and its parts. The act of designing a complex discipline demands a creative movement, which should be unique in essence. This very first finding is undoubtedly unexpected; it generated an incredible *rupture* in the knowledge I have already constructed about course design. It was a *complex rupture* that remains there, opened to new interconnections.

My alternative to deal with the students' and teachers' main complaints (as mentioned previously), keeping in mind the institutional expectations related to the discipline objectives and course load hours was to explore the *complex educational design* through *projects*. In so doing and therefore, by observing Behrens (2000,2006) orientations, I might keep the students focused on a provocative learning situation, attuned to the idea of developing a research that would allow them to work individually and together, connecting and reconnecting pieces of information gathered from various sources, going back and forth on knowledge construction to circularly and recursively discover new pieces of information so that they might bring the proposed project to a satisfactory conclusion. This was the concept of project that would be exploited in the blended discipline.

Considering the association suggested, but focused on the *preparation* stage, I outlined the comprehensive structure of the blended discipline. The outline is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Language & Internet: Outline of the Preparation Stage

- The first face-to-face meeting will take place in the university laboratory and the following topics will be addressed:
 - Course Plan presentation
 - general instructions about the blended discipline and Moodle new configuration
 - informal conversation on:
 - students' previous experiences on Moodle and other blended disciplines
 - students' needs and expectations upon this discipline
 - teacher's expectations upon the subject
 - initial decisions about the discipline schedule and each project deadline
 - expectations on partnership among students and teacher in order to develop the course dynamics the way it was presented.
- Syllabus will be addressed in three projects: the first will be done individually; the second, in pairs, and the third, in groups of four students. This arrangement will be a way of creating the possibility of online negotiation, collaboration and partnership for students will need the research done in one project to develop the next one
- Projects will evolve in such a way that the previous is part of the next so that they are interconnected but each one has new aspects to be discovered and contributions to offer to the whole
- Each project will be develop in *three steps* (three weeks) followed by a (face-to-face or online) *presentation* (prepared in one week). So each project will take four weeks to be concluded
- To create an online routine and better deal with deadlines, when a project is displayed on Moodle, the *three steps* will be available. After three weeks (*these steps'* deadline), the *presentation* will be then displayed and a new deadline (one week) will be given.
- The final presentation of each project may be done according to different formats: PowerPoint presentation, video, written text, or any other format. It may be established by the teacher or choose by the student/group.
- After the conclusion of each project, there will be reflective moment or a face-to-face meeting to evaluate/reflect upon the online class dynamics.

Grounded on the initial decisions made at the *preparation* level, I started the *execution* stage, determining features of the environment layout, selecting interfaces, and defining issues related to accessibility, usability, and navigability (Nielsen, 2000). These actions characterized the beginning of the blended discipline, the moment when it was implemented and started to be managed. It was the moment in which *preparation*, *execution* and *reflection* were unmistakably interconnected, acting together to help me be attuned to the objectives to reach, and sensitive to the needs and expectations to achieve.

From a complex perspective, Project 1 started by inviting students to retrieve their previous knowledge on reading in order to establish connections with the information they are supposed to research on, i.e., reading strategies, and reading printed and digital material. This deliberate purpose attempted to provide the students with an opportunity to step in a familiar territory before

exploring what might be completely unknown to them. In so doing, recursive connections were established and so were curiosity and motivation. It is interesting to notice that, although any change could be done any time if necessary, Project 1 was accepted by the group the way it was planned, except for the deadline of the initial steps, which needed to be postponed.

Taking the students' positive reaction, acceptance and interaction into consideration, I decided to establish the knowledge construction route by introducing the contrast between texts and hypertexts as Project 2. Such a topic provided an interesting connection with Project 1 and, according to my personal investigation, with other face-to-face disciplines the students were attending at that time which were addressing similar or interconnected topics. I believed that the research and discussion about texts and hypertexts from various angles would equip them with more arguments to debate the contrast proposed by the Project and consequently to link their conclusions to the disciplines involved. I also believed that they might also be engendered in a kind of unplanned interdisciplinarity — which certainly unveils a complex learning environment.

Considering their performance in Project 2 and based on their growing interest on the Internet in general, but particularly on social networks, I decided to address *texting* in Project 3. The last project was then focused on this concept in theoretical and practical terms, on the meaning of main abbreviations used for communication, and on discussing about the repercussion of this way of writing on different channels of communication that could also be transferred to school settings.

Assessing the Results and Making Meaning of this Experience

As emphasized previously, the *execution* and *reflection* stages are articulated from the moment the blended discipline was available to the students until the time the last procedure was concluded. However, there were moments in which one or the other had to be stressed, depending on the features of specific actions. *Reflection* was particularly evident in the end of Project 1, when it assumed the status of an activity: *Looking back... moving forward*. As its name suggested, the students were supposed to look back and analyze Project 1 to move forward, helping me change and adjust necessary aspects of the discipline. In other words, they needed to write their impressions about the new learning environment layout, dynamics and routine.

The students' reaction to this first project was rewarding and indicative that the choices made were adequate. They acknowledged the attention given to the deadlines established, to the teacher's *presence* in the online classroom and to the nature of the activities, as illustrated by the excerpts¹ below.

I think that Moodle is been very dynamic until now. I'm sure that the activities have added a lot of knowledge not only for me, but for all of us! (...) The deadlines are perfect! (...) It's the ideal time to research and make tasks in a careful way.

Well, the Moodle activities have been different from what I had imagined. I thought we were going to study the English grammar the old way, with exercises. But instead it looks like the last semester, but in English. I've been practicing my writing and vocabulary

I am very happy with the way the new Moodle performed. I think much better most of the activities are online and we have the opportunity to speak with the teacher at any time, and the doubts about whether or not to put on activities. With this opportunity to talk with the teacher, we have more time to make a better activity. The deadline for leave activities and lessons has been larger than last semester and this is really good. (...) I am really happy with Moodle this semester.

In this project what I really liked was the division in three projects! And the different deadlines to send to you! This way, I had time to do more patiently search over the topics. And also, to do the final presentation, which I chose a power-point one, I was very secure in my writing. With all the research I also learned a lot about reading and its different techniques, that I am sure using them for my studies and with my students too. So far, I am definitely enjoying this new Moodle!

Considering the connotation of the students' evaluation, I kept on developing the two remaining projects as described in the previous section. Unfortunately, we could not have such a similar reflective moment after Project 2 because its deadline was postponed, and Project 3 had to be done in the sequence. Once in a while, however, I met a student in the university who informally commented on the discipline and provided me with positive feedback.

However, formal reflection was undertaken in the end of the discipline in two specific moments: in the final face-to-face meeting and in writing, on Moodle, as illustrated by some excerpts below.

This time, Moodle was more comfortable to do and the students had more time to do it. It was so great!

The deadlines were better this semester. We had more flexibility, and in my opinion that is one of the most important points of an online course, so I liked this aspect.

I think Moodle helped me to learn some things, to be more careful in what I read and write, for example. (...) But I liked Moodle and all the projects, because this made me more careful in everything. So, thanks for it.

I thought this discipline very interesting. We have approached many things that I consider relevant. For example, reading strategies. It's very important we know how we can do a good reading. (...) I've enjoyed that we had more time to do the activities. (...) In general, I've enjoyed the course. And I've learned a lot with it. Thank you for all!

In my opinion the course was great and taught me important topics like the "hypertexts." I reflected about the importance of reading and I understood the differences between "texts" and "hypertexts." I wish I could discuss more with my fellows about each topic to see more points of view of the subject.

Besides the opinions presented, either in our meeting or in writing, the students made relevant comments on the length of Project 2. According to them, we spent a long time researching and dealing with a topic they "*know by heart*," as one student said, and as a result, we were short of time for Project 3.

I partially agree with this comment, but I have to ponder that, from the teacher viewpoint, the intention was to interconnect this discipline to some others to facilitate for the students to articulate contents related to hypertexts, common issue addressed by them in other disciplines at that particular moment of the semester. In didactic terms, it would be an interesting opportunity to establish a kind of interdisciplinary link. Nonetheless, from the students' perspective, it resulted in being overwhelming just because they have already seen the same topic on many occasions and had the feeling they knew enough about it. They perceived no need to establish other connections, to investigate the same topic from other perspectives, to deepen their knowledge; they thought it was useless to spend much time on it. Maybe, I should have investigated the other disciplines' contents more deeply and tried to find an alternative focus to emphasize unknown angles. However, what worried me the most was the fact that they did not want to learn more, they had the feeling they knew enough, "*by heart*," as if they have reached totality – a *fake lenient* totality, though; they were not aware of it either.

In addition to the comments already presented, the students made suggestions to shorten the distance between the blended discipline and the translation field. According to them, this articulation should be more clearly addressed when they dealt with abbreviations (Project 3) and, particularly in the Final Presentation, when the inquiry² suggested was focused on a *language teacher* and not on a *translator*. They complained that once more it was disregarded the fact that future translators formed the major part of the group. I could then realize that this argument was more likely that group's issue than a controversy generated by the new design of that blended discipline.

In regard to that, it is necessary to explain that the English Language Course comprises the possibility to follow a teaching and/or a translation career. Although the teaching career has been traditionally selected and corresponded

to the majority of our language students, this profile has been changing lately and cannot be cited as the prototypical anymore. For this reason, I should have studied the group's profile more carefully, especially when directed the final inquiry, mentioning the *language professional* — without prioritizing either teachers or translators.

The last comment the students presented was related to the length of Project 3, accomplished in a shorter period of time (due to the deadline postponement of the second project), and unfortunately the one that brought to discussion the most innovative topic. I do agree with the students when they refer to *time* arguments, in addition to their evaluation, I think Project 3 should be better elaborated to address social network and Facebook posting, for instance. These were topics that I had in mind but could not include in the design due to the lack of time in the end of the school semester.

Even though the blended discipline conceived of a *complex educational design* perspective still presents some weak aspects to be improved, as revealed by the arguments presented so far, it is relevant to stress the novelty it introduced to the university blended courses. It is particularly rewarding to read a comment such as, "I think activities improved a lot, made sense and had relation with our daily life and course." I do believe it summarizes the meaning made by this experience: a blended discipline on reading and writing in a foreign language that made sense and that was connected to the students' reality. Undoubtedly, the objectives were reached!

Interpreting Educational Implications: It Makes Sense!

Contemplating *Language & Internet* from the CED viewpoint, I come up with two interesting findings. The first one regards the idea of redesigning which means a conceptual rupture which indicates, from a complex perspective, that a course cannot be *designed again*, but it should be conceived of from a fresh angle, opened to connections and reconnections in various ways so that knowledge is constructed circularly, recursively, retroactively, being always opened to changes and transformations.

The second finding regards negotiation. Interpreting the interactive movement that emerged from the blended discipline, I realized that the decision on each project theme was made by me, without any negotiation with the students. This aspect to some extent contradicts the design pattern adopted; however negotiation at this level would have compromised the whole schedule of the discipline; therefore, my decision went to a direction that seemed to be suitable to this particular situation. Except for project theme, however, negotiation happened when it was necessary.

Reflecting on what was done throughout the semester, I would evaluate the experience of implemented a complex blended discipline in a traditional curriculum as a valid and enriching educational one. There are aspects to be improved, as remarked previously, but it was naturally expected from a pilot study. For me, the most important meaning made from the semester lived with a group of freshman students was the possibility to recognize how

involved and critical they become about their own learning process. It is something priceless for those who have just started their undergraduate course and who have a long journey ahead of paths and possibilities to discover. I sincerely hope they find out they do not *know enough* and that knowledge construction is never completed. Perhaps this is a lesson for me to somehow emphasize in the next *Language & Internet* version.

To conclude this article, the inclusion of a complex blended discipline in a traditional curriculum may signalize the beginning of a meaningful transformation in the university culture. I believe that by accepting and showing interest for the results of this pilot study, an important step ahead was given. Traditional and complex thoughts now live together but complexity has already been recognized as existing and possible in the university environment — and questions started to be asked about its meaning and potentialities. Perhaps other teachers get interested, and the complex texture becomes woven together with the curricular fabric more rapidly. Having more agents, more courses designed from a complex perspective, the traditional curricular feature may sooner become history, giving up its territory to a complexity-centred curriculum.

Notes

1. The excerpts are literally transcribed and the anonymity of the students is preserved.
2. I refer to the following inquiry: “How should the language teacher deal with abbreviations: accept or reject them? What would you do?”

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