

FOSTERING A CRITICAL APPROACH TO DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN GRADUATE LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION AND POSTGRADUATE INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMS

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Abstract

In this paper, I debate the role of tertiary educators in legitimizing practices that foster the use of digital technologies in educational settings. Adopting the narrative inquiry as methodology and grounding the discussion in critical literacy studies, I present my own practical knowledge as a professor in a Brazilian university. My interpretation suggests that some of the graduate and postgraduate projects developed under my supervision have presented practical ideas leading to the adoption of a critical approach to language, technology and society. This favors and fosters citizenship and social justice approaches to foreign language education activities in Brazilian schools.

Introduction

Following digital advances in information communication and technologies – and mostly after Internet affordances were rapidly shared – there has been a sense of urgency towards technology innovation in educational settings across the world. For the last two decades, pre-service and in-service Brazilian educators have been working under pressure to integrate digital resources into their teaching routines, in order to ensure that educational practices meet the standards of a society permeated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Santos Neto and Mill (2018), interested in exploring the connections between the intensification of teaching work and Distance Learning, conducted bibliometric research, investigating a single and specific digital bank of Brazilian Ph.D. theses in Education that were published between the years of 2002 and 2012. Their findings showed that almost one-third of a total of 3,468 thesis mentioned words related to digital technologies, either in the thesis title or key-words. Words such as “techno”, “digit”, “online”, “compute”, “Internet”, “virtual”, “cellular”, “tablet” or “EAD” (the Brazilian Portuguese anagram for Distance Education) were evident. These researchers noted that the majority of the works in their findings were related to the use of ICT in pedagogical practices (Santos Neto & Mill, 2018, p. 130). Other important investigations have also tackled this issue. A recent survey on the use of information and communication technologies in Brazilian schools, conducted by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (Brazilian Network Information Center [BNIC], 2018, p. 242), found out that

among the 1,430 consulted and sampled schools located in urban areas, 97% of the teachers reported using the Internet, mostly on mobile devices. The report explains that in a similar survey conducted in 2013, Internet use was reported in only 38% of the sample results. However, the same report confirms that among students there are still consistent inequalities as “even though 85% of students located in urban areas were considered Internet users (...), 22% of those who studied in public schools went online only via mobile phones, a percentage that was only 2% among private school students”, meaning that those poorer students only had access to online technologies on their mobile devices. This shows us that there is still a huge gap between those learners who can pay for private schooling and those who have to attend public schools. As for the latter, there is still little to no access to Internet and/or hardware equipment at home and/or schools (BNIC, 2018, p. 164). Another relevant finding was that there was an increasing number of teachers who reported using mobile phones in pedagogical activities: 53% in 2017 against 36% in 2015 amongst public school teachers, and 69% in 2017 against 46% in 2015 amongst private school teachers (BNIC, 2018, p. 164). Moreover, the survey also points out the remaining challenges to overcome in order to implement ICT in rigorous and appropriate pedagogical practices in Brazilian schools. Teachers and principals interviewed said that there is still a lack of ICT professional development programs. They also mentioned significant issues relating to infrastructure, such as fewer computers than needed and a very limited, very slow to no Internet access in public schools (BNIC, 2018, p. 165).

Although the aforementioned results might reaffirm the premise that teachers have been consistently motivated to adopt and adapt digital technologies to their working routines, they also imply that there are still pressing issues to be discussed. As an example, there is the ongoing inequality found in terms of digital technology access amongst students coming from different social groups in Brazil. It is possible to infer that by allowing or denying access to multiple literacies and their affordances, we might be promoting changes or maintaining social inequities. This suggests teachers and tertiary professors educating teachers need to take a closer look at the use of the ICT in pedagogical activities. Some crucial aspects to be considered beforehand might relate to *the sorts of activities that should/could be developed, by whom, where and why*.

With this scenario in mind, the purpose of this paper is to stimulate a debate concerning the role and responsibilities of tertiary educators in fostering, during teacher education programs, emergent practices that validate the presence of digital technologies in a range of different educational settings. I drive this discussion from a brief literature review on some interfaces amongst technology, education and critical literacies. Therefore, the discussion offers a well-informed and critically-oriented interpretation, in the form of a narrative of my own practical knowledge, which is based on some of the dialogues and experiences I have shared with both graduate and postgraduate students whose final graduate papers and research projects I have supervised in Brazil at an English language

teaching graduate program and also at an interdisciplinary postgraduate program in Languages, Media and Arts.

Grounding the Discussion: Literature and Methodology Overview

As a leading name in pedagogy, Freire's (2005) ideas concerning language teaching and learning as an act of politics and power, with high stake social consequences, have inspired a great number of studies and the birth of several other similar educational theories. Luke and Dooley (2011, p. 1) propose, as per Freire's discussions, that literacy practices should promote emancipated citizens and social equity. Presently operating within the context of a digital technology-centered society, concepts of literacy are re-signified, as the print text has been gradually losing space to redesigned reading and writing practices that involve hyperlinked, multimodal and inter-semiotic texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). It is important to ponder what kind of influence these recent developments have on language teachers' work because "the bearing of technology on the role of the teacher has been one of the most contested areas of educational technology discussion" (Selwyn, 2011, p. 117). Following ICT development, several different educational approaches have been espoused, some of them sporting apocalyptic points of view. For instance, it has been questioned whether schools might become redundant, facing the way online media resources allow information and knowledge to be produced, shared and accessed (Lemke, 1998).

Whichever approach we take, it is reasonable to say that educational issues are a complex subject, and that it involves a lot more than simply selecting and using a set of tools and techniques, no matter how "cool", updated or resourceful they might be (Selwyn, 2014). As Lankshear and Knobel (2008) suggest, new technological affordances would (hopefully) provide us with rather diversified teaching opportunities. However, just moving our lessons from print texts and black/whiteboards to online content displayed on digital screens does not cater for a new *ethos*, as Lankshear and Knobel (2008) propose it. According to those authors, in order to establish a new *ethos* in educational settings, educators would have to combine a set of new techniques with renovated (or even new) practices, thus stimulating a *new mindset*. Taking digital technologies for granted, as if they would autonomously be capable of achieving the desired changes so as to transform education and social realities alone, might sound dangerous, if not a bit naïve. Consequently, when dealing with the dilemma of intersecting education, technology and a critical view of literacies, two important aspects need to be taken into consideration: firstly (though not necessarily *at first*), we need to be aware of the assumed impacts of technology on pre-service / in-service teachers (Selwyn, 2011). Moreover, there is also relevance in re-discussing the intended purposes and objectives of education itself (cf.: Selwyn, 2011; 2014; Luke & Dooley, 2011).

Assumed (and Assuming) Impacts of ICT on Teachers

Unfortunately, and in a rather common fashion, a set of assumptions concerning people's expectations towards the impact of any *new* technology on teachers/teaching practices might usually drive to misconceived notions of the role of education and educators. The relationship between any new accessible tools and their effective use in a classroom is not one of immediate cause and consequence (Selwyn 2011; 2014). Assuming that radical changes in education and their consequently social effects will be achieved by merely implementing or using new technological equipment might be a formula for disappointment. On the same wavelength, there have been other identifiable assumed outcomes, such as expecting that teachers would, automatically and immediately, be willing to take part in a variety of social networking media platforms identified as “ideal means for ‘a large and diverse community of education professionals’ to share their knowledge, experience and good practice with others around the world” (Selwyn 2014, pp. 118-119). Assigning blame to teachers for not using digital resources at their best would just mean we are supporting a partially-cut historical view of the issues at hand. It would also expose us to the dangers of transferring moral imperatives onto educators and educational institutions as a form of claiming for practice and process renovations solemnly based on the (supposed) beneficial outcomes of bringing digital technology affordances to schools (Selwyn, 2014).

Intended Purposes of (Language) Education

Considering my own professional scenario, I propose the discussion of educational purposes in the area of language education, more specifically, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, as well as in the context of the interdisciplinary postgraduate program in Language, Media and Arts. In accordance with critically oriented perspectives, I have assumed that one of the main objectives of education is to promote citizenship and, as a consequence, foster social equity. For a language educator, this means approaching texts, their correspondent codes and discourse(s) as “human technologies for representing and reshaping possible worlds” (Luke & Dooley, 2011, p. 1). For instance, adopting critical literacies as their pedagogical approach, EFL educators would plan their lessons in order to promote learners' discursive engagement and critical analysis capacity, thus favoring socially situated practices (Lankshear & Knobel 2008; 2011). In terms of associating ICT with EFL educational practices, it would mean rethinking practices as well as techniques in order to pursue the “new ethos” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), i.e., favor a set of new techniques/tools that are currently actually used to create new socially-shared practices, the ones that somehow represent effective changes in not only *what* is done, but also *how*, *why* and *by whom* such things are done in their specific social contexts. As an example, we can think of social media networking platforms for video channels as resources which support affordances that allow for different people, from different social realities, to share independent, free, hybrid, remixed videos they produce and share on their own. In this reimagined environment, a fan could, for

example, share and/or access a video featuring their favorite band, tv show or streaming series. Even if pre-internet fans were already familiar with remixing (e.g. fanart made by cutting and pasting magazine photos), a video channel such as the one roughly described offers a renewed fan practice which has only become possible due to digital technologies and the Internet, thus paving the way for a *new ethos*. However, as I propose in the next part of this paper, simply presenting such videos in an EFL lesson as a source for language input would not exactly represent a renewed pedagogical practice. As a matter of fact, in order to approach such *new ethos* at educational settings from a critical literacy perspective, educators would have to go beyond assisting and encouraging learners to use them. Assuming that being “literate” is a concept that embodies being competent to engage in different socially constructed ways of establishing communication means that we must recognize that institutionalized discourses and cultural practices are part of the rules that impact the uses of, as well as grant access to, those social practices – and we have to add new or developing technologies to this combo (Kellner & Share, 2007).

Methodological Grounds

A wide range of qualitative research investigating teacher activity has been conducted in the last 30 years. Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 4) affirm that, in a self-reflecting fashion, teacher researchers are usually teachers themselves, investigating their own and/or their peers’ practices. Teacher investigation goals are often described as pursuant to “enhancing teachers’ sense of professional role and identity”, as well as a result of following the idea that “engaging in teacher research can contribute to better quality teaching and learning in classrooms” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 4). Moreover, teacher research might be also seen as a means to provide teachers with opportunities to voice their claims, fight for justice, respect and social recognition and, finally, to support well-informed decisions (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

Given that the main goal of this paper is to debate the interface between ICT and educational practices in tertiary teacher educational contexts (in graduate and postgraduate degree programs), and from a supervisor’s point of view, I have assumed a qualitative approach to teacher investigation. Exploring possible benefits of hindsight, I chose to focus on (some of) my own recent professional experiences as a professor and supervisor at a Brazilian university. In order to accomplish my main purpose, I adopted a narrative inquiry as a methodological approach to zooming in on my practical knowledge (cf., Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997).

It is important to notice that in this paper, I do not intend to offer any kind of rounded-up or “clear and cut” answers to the issues I raise. I am fully aware that it is a quite vast, complex and multilayered problem-based investigation topic, one that would need to be lengthy, deep and wide ranging, handled by tightly looking into each single educational context. Consequently, stated simply, this is a

discussion sampler. The experiences I present focus on the actions I have personally taken in order to foster a critical approach to digital technology use, mostly by dialoguing with my students during supervising hours. These are the moments when I make well-informed efforts to provoke them to rethink their own views on the use of ICT in education from a critically oriented perspective. Something I genuinely believe might have somehow impacted their education. Thus, what I do intend to achieve with this paper is to instigate further debates on the raised topic by offering my own *practical knowledge*. Connelly et al. (1997, p. 666) explains that “teacher practical knowledge” is a term coined to conceptualize the idea that teachers are “knowledgeable”, and that they draw this knowledge from the “sum total of the teacher’s experience”. One of the methods to collect such practical knowledge is by autobiographical writing, a narrative activity in which “people write about their histories, their hopes, their ambitions and their personal and professional stories” (Connelly et al., 1997, p. 667). Accordingly, McAlpine (2016, p. 32) states that narrative research is a useful qualitative methodology that should be considered as a “broad landscape” either in collecting and analyzing and/or reporting results. Integrating social context and temporality, and denoting agency to the narrator, narratives are a constituting part of our daily routines. McAlpine (2016, p. 33) informs us that stories are practical ways for a person to build up a plot where their lives are narrated within a coherent sequence, integrating past, present and future, because “each account, whether told only to oneself or to others, provides a robust way of (...) locating oneself and others in the account, and foreshadowing the future.”

Hence, by adopting narrative research as a methodology, I am also assuming an interpretative approach, one of many remarkable methods used in qualitative social sciences inquiries. I also assume this perspective because, as several other researchers involved in language and discourse investigations, I reckon that stories are basic units of human experiences (McAlpine, 2016), and so it is an important tool to perform a reflective study based on my experiences at tertiary education. Therefore, the next part of this paper brings an *excerpt* of my *practical knowledge*, in the form of an autobiographic narrative, a sampler meant to illustrate this discussion. It reports (some of) my empirical efforts, as a supervisor, to deal with the implications of assuming a critically oriented approach to ICT in education, hoping to provide other tertiary educators with insightful ideas.

An Autobiographic Narrative Sample of Practical Knowledge

Having adopted a critical approach to education in my own working practices, I have faced considerable and varied challenges whilst helping graduate / postgraduate candidates to try and assume a critically oriented view of their own work. During supervising sessions, when my students and I sit down to discuss possible pedagogical uses of ICT in EFL teaching/learning processes, or when we are weighing the role of digital technologies in their research interests in the postgraduate program, I often face resistance and, sometimes, confrontation. The

idea of problematizing established uses of either any sort of technology (new or old) or socially conformed practices is a daring one that not many are willing to partake in. Having worked as a teacher for over thirty years, I have dared myself to confront my own former established perceptions of teaching and learning, ones I had carefully crafted throughout my teaching career. The first time I had effectively faced this challenge was during my doctoral research years, when I carried out a dialogically oriented Participatory Action Research, in a Brazilian public school, to investigate discourses about digital technology in EFL lessons (Azzari, 2017). Working with a volunteer in-service teacher, I embarked on a journey that would take me much deeper and further than I could have ever expected to go. Being confronted by my former supervisor (already a critical literacy practitioner) in the very first days of my Ph.D. research, I felt the effects of operating under these critical perspectives. I usually say that I started that journey with a lot of certainties, a couple of questions and an “all high and mighty” attitude, just to finish it with a lot of different question, a set of broken paradigms and the strong feeling that I still had a long way to go as a researcher, and for an unforeseeable future. But as poetic as it may sound now, it surely was no bed of roses, a fact well registered and documented in my published thesis (Azzari, 2017). All in all, my point is: critical thinking, at first, hurts.

Most Brazilians in their forties or fifties are products of military dictatorship-oriented schools, guided by an industrial-like ethos. We were trained to show respect to the teachers and institutions, bearing a sort of “distant appreciation” for what they would represent, not for what they really were. As learners, we were not taught to critically think, question or look at others or ourselves. Then, one fine day, we grew up and became teachers. We started our careers using black boards, chalk, and print textbooks. All the information we needed to know and teach was carefully gathered in expensive, heavy print encyclopedias and our roles and identity as educators were clearly cut and handed out to us, even after the winds of democracy came, putting down the barriers of those dictatorship years. All of a sudden, the nineties came up with revolutions in the form of personal computers, mobile phones and whiteboards. Then, the years of 2000 took us up and down on an information and communication rollercoaster. Schooling would never be the same, would it? I used to think, as many alike, that the problem of facing little to no change in current schooling might have been the fact that we had not changed the way we organize our classrooms, many of which are still decorated with heavy desks, carefully lined up one in front of the other, or maybe because the teachers were merely scanning their old overhead projector-laminated exercises to make them look brand new in a power point presentation. However, critically oriented perspectives of literacies have made me see that the changes in educational issues run much deeper than that.

When one of my students, in their late teens or early twenties, come to supervising meetings and tell me he/she wants to write a paper on the uses of free video channels, available on Internet, to simply show “how great” digital technologies can be in a contemporary EFL lesson, I have to blink twice in order

to see if I am not still trapped in the eighties. Then, I usually throw them back by asking a question such as “And how different would that be from playing a video snippet from a videocassette recorder tape?” At first, it seems they take it as a rhetorical question, to which I usually only get a bemused face and a shoulder shrug for an answer (I wonder if the matter is that some of them do not acknowledge VCR technology). It actually happened last year and, unfortunately, more than once: one student wanted to design a project about using modern cartoons (*all digitally available, of course*); the other wanted to propose the use of video lessons with grammar explanations (*from a free social media video channel, of course*), and the other wanted to use a very famous, very behaviorist and structuralist-oriented platform (*digitally situated and free, of course*). According to those students, all of the resources mentioned were meant to “help promote the use of ICT in EFL lessons”. And that is when I interfere as a critically oriented supervisor by asking them questions such as: *What for? Why? How? How different would that be from other ingrained practices?* And, for the *pièce de résistance*, I challenge them to look into the discursive dimensions of their selected digital objects in order to develop an educational/research project in which the use of ICT is underpinned by a critical literacy rationale.

After the initial shock (which sometimes never seems to be surpassed) and even after some of them confess that they had actually imagined a “much simpler research project”, the majority of them end up accepting the challenges I propose. As a matter of fact, these (now) teachers, who once were under my supervision in higher education programs, have managed to come up with some meaningful, feasible and pretty good ideas that not only did integrate the use of new technologies, but that also reflected a *new mindset* (Lanskhear & Knobel, 2008). Due to the innate restraints of this present text, I am now unable to fully describe those projects but, roughly speaking, most of them still integrated digital videos, inverted lesson-like activities, podcasts, the use of several social media platforms, and others alike, otherwise critically approaching those resources and suggesting situated and meaningful practices. Bearing EFL lessons at regular schools in mind, some projects have dealt with new literary text genres, such as *Instapoems* (short multimodal poems written/circulated on social media platforms). Others have worked with literary classics, as the likes of Shakespeare’s dramas and Oscar Wilde’s novels, suggesting that digitally adapted versions of those stories (re-signified as chats, instant messages or even as comic books edited by a famous superhero publishing company) might help teachers to fill the gaps between young learners and such linguistically/discursively complex texts. All in all, those projects have gone beyond a “language-as-a-code” and/or a “techno-enhanced” simplistic perspective to explore new paradigms such as:

- What their future/present EFL learners could learn from those ICT objects and their semiotic affordances;
- What other literacies might as well be developed with such objects (such as EFL students producing their own videos, joining discussing forums, using online platforms for creative and collaborative writing, etc.). These latter items are ways through which the uses of ICT in education might privilege

students' actions (apart from adding variety to teachers' procedures and materials), which implies providing learners with access to some of the technologies and the digital literacies they also need to engage in out-of-school socially shared practices.

Last, but not least, the graduate/postgraduate learners would go further and include critically oriented discussions in their EFL projects, also preparing activities that involve the use of ICT to problematize institutionalized discourses.

Some questions that have popped-up in their activities would be:

“How does that movie represent diversity?”; “What female / disabled people images are portrayed in the video (or song, videogame, RPG game, forum comments)?”; “What does it represent?”; “How does it portray relationships/ different cultures and what does it mean / imply?”; “What does a family look like in your community and how does it compare to the texts you have just worked with?”. These sample critically-oriented discussions would be part of the ICT enhanced activities and would be stated accordingly, depending on each particular semantic content/main theme at hand.

Reflecting upon this roughly noted excerpt of my practical knowledge, I see that initial ideas of the use of ICT in EFL education turned into well-informed proposals once those novice teachers were faced with my conscious decision to foster critically-oriented uses of digital technologies. Therefore, I hope that this might be considered as a starting point for the discussion I aimed to generate.

Final Comments

As a consequence of the scenario presented in the introduction, it has been commonly assumed that any contemporary class should regularly include some form of technological enhanced practice. Although it might sound as a fairly recurrent social movement in educational history, I suggest that an urge for implementing and/or exchanging sets of tools and procedures in educational settings solemnly based on current ICT technology availabilities still needs to be taken by academic researchers with, maybe, more than “just a pinch of salt”. For a geopolitically and economically heterogeneous and contradictory country such as Brazil, for instance, that is currently living under the premises of far-right conservative policies, and where there is still such a long way to be paved in order to find (some) sort of social equity, the interface between ICT and educational changes still demands a lot of critical thinking. This also implies rethinking the *roles performed by tertiary educators* in promoting the use of ICT in education, as well as *how and why* it is done. All in all, reflecting upon my *practical knowledge* as a tertiary educator (cf. Connelly et al., 1997), I conclude that my own role in fostering critical literacies might never be a comfortable one at first, as no real change usually is, because promoting citizenship and social equity has to do with confrontation and dissent. It means that sometimes we need to ask disturbing questions and it certainly involves making a serious effort to find breaches and scape-routes, new *mindsets* and *ethos* in education, in order to disestablish old

social orders and construct new ones. Maybe, the act of renewing equipment and procedures, thus giving teachers and learners access to digital resources, should be taken as a possibility to provide those actors with opportunities to develop new *practices* with new *techniques*, a *new social mindset*. It means the ICT use in education would be also promoting other multiple and equally important literacies, currently needed in order to enable social participation and for real citizenship to flourish. Hopefully, we can still make it feasible to reimagine possible futures, when social equity and justice is achieved through education.

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