Critical Teaching and Horizontal Relations in the Classroom

O Ensino Crítico e as Relações Horizontais em Sala de Aula

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Abstract

This paper approaches the changes in the modes of communication in the contemporary network society from the beginning of the classical Mass Communication Theory, in which the model sender/receiver prevailed, to Castells' (2007) Self-mass Communication Theory and its implications for the modes of production and circulation of information through new media, cell phones and social networks. From this point on, we have problematized the concept of prosumer and the rupture of the barrier between producers and consumers, as well as the redefinition of teachers and students role in the context of the network society where the convergence of media promotes new modes of interaction with digital communication environments and active participation of the individuals in the production and circulation of information worldwide. Hence, we concluded that such transformations have promoted new means of interaction between teachers and students through the emergence of horizontal relations networks in which there is a decentralization of the teacher in the learning processes.

Keywords: *Critical Teaching. New Literacies. Interactivity. Social Practices. New Media.*

Resumo

Este artigo aborda as transformações nos modos de comunicação na sociedade contemporânea em rede, desde a teoria clássica da comunicação de massa em que havia o predomínio do modelo emissor/receptor, assim como a teoria da s*elf-mass communication* de Castells (2007) e suas implicações nos modos de produção e circulação da informação, sobretudo através das novas mídias, celulares e redes sociais. A partir daí, problematiza-se o conceito de *prosumer* e o rompimento da barreira entre produtores e consumidores*,* assim como a redefinição dos papéis de professores e alunos no contexto da sociedade em rede, na qual a convergência de mídias promove novas formas de interação com os meios digitais de comunicação e a participação ativa dos sujeitos na produção e circulação de informações pelo mundo. Assim, conclui-se que tais transformações têm promovido novas formas de interação entre professores e alunos, por meio do surgimento de redes de relações horizontais em que há a descentralização do professor nos processos de aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: Ensino Crítico. Novos Letramentos. Interatividade. Práticas Sociais. Novas Mídias.

1 Introduction

This paper is a section of a Masters research[1] in progress about the use of New Literacies Theories (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2008) for English teaching in the public school. It is an autoethnographical study, since it was applied to my own students from the 4th and 5th years of elementary school. The research was conducted in a public elementary school in the city of Osasco – SP, and the data were collected from February to June, 2014. Data collection was performed through notes, audio records of the classes and interviews with the students. Afterwards, these data were systematized, analyzed, and confronted with the theoretical framework.

Literacies (in the plural) have influenced the way we think about interactivity and its implications for the social practices and learning process, since individuals have been continuously interconnected to a larger and collective structure, in which multiliteracies are activated to understand the simultaneous and multimodal characteristics of the texts. In addition, the language used in these texts is not neutral or objective, and the technologies of media and communication networks have different impacts on the way we connect to each other and the ways we see the world (MORGAN, 2013). Along with the communication networks, several challenges take place in this scenario, such as the need to examine the opportunities and obstacles that the new media promotes, to consider new political, economic, and cultural practices, and to reflect upon classroom practices to engage students actively in the learning process (Ibid.).

Those literacies connect media, social practices, and people to construct meaning, they also interfering at the way we frame and are framed by integrated networks (LEMKE, 2010). According to Castells (2007), the emergence of self-mass communication*,* through the *internet*, cell phones, digital media, and many other tools has led to the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication, which connect global

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and local communication. Thus, the main point of this paper is to reflect upon the role of formal education in the network society and its implications for this scenario, especially concerning teacher/student relationships in the learning processes.

2 Development

2.1 From mass communication to self-mass communication

The classical *Mass Communication Theory* is based on the unidirectional mass distribution of messages in the industrial society, when not only press media, magazines and books, but also Television, Cinema and Radio were the main sources for accessing information (MORIN, 2009). Accordingly, in the industrial society, communication system was centered on the mass media and one-way messages from one to many (CASTELLS, 2007). Therefore, this modality used to promote a sort of vertical communication from one sender/transmitter, which could be a person or an institution, such as the TV, Cinema, or Radio, to one receiver that could be a collective audience.

To start with, it is important to consider some changes that have occurred in the paradigm of communication in the network society, and the role of the literacies that emerge in the contemporary context. In Castells' view, the self-mass communication theory has developed other ways to communicate through the *internet*, mobile communication, and digital media. This form of communication is characterized by the convergence of new media and "the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous" (CASTELLS 2007, p.246). One of the main features of self mass communication is that it is *"self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many"* (CASTELLS 2007, p.248). In addition, these changes in production, reproduction, and circulation of information have contributed to an unlimited diversity in a new medium "whose senders [and receivers] are globally distributed and globally interactive" (CASTELLS 2007, p.248).

Consequently, the focus of this modality of communication is the agency of the individual, who is not a mere passive subject anymore. This individual can practice his autonomy and active participation in the communication networks. Morgan (2013) points out that a theory of affordances takes into consideration the importance of an active meaning-making, and the textual experiences of the reader/receiver of the message. Furthermore, Lankshear and Knobel (2005) have reported that the varieties of literacies are focused on the linguistic and cultural diversity, and their growing impact on the new modes of technological communication has changed the demands of the individuals' abilities for the very linguistic and cultural dimensions, as well as for the social practices. Concerning the labor market, Cope and Kalantzis (2000) have stated that the Post-Fordism Era has replaced the old hierarchical structure created by Henry Ford through the model of mass production techniques, characterized by repetitive unskilled tasks on the industrial production lines. For this reason, the model of horizontal relationships takes place, in which the teamwork prevails and responsible and multitask workers identify with the values and mission of the companies.

Hence, my argument is that due to the multifaceted aspects of these new communication networks and the multimodal configuration of texts in the network society, which affect the way we connect to people in all fields of social life and in which communication becomes global and local, generic and customized and ever-changing, the organizations where the power relations are institutionalized – including schools - are being constantly challenged. Consequently, we need to (re)consider the changing roles that teachers and students have assumed lately. For this reason, we problematize the hypothesis that the horizontal relations between teachers and students arise in this contemporary context as a way to negotiate meanings in the learning processes, and to promote more democratic learning environments, in which students participate more actively sharing their experiences as long as they have their previous knowledge legitimated.

2.2 Learners as prosumers

In this section, it becomes crucial to conceptualize the term *prosumer*, which has emerged in the network society and it is a fusion of the words *producer + consumer*, aimed to understand the new roles that learners have assumed at school. First, the changes that have occurred in communication in the network society, especially due to technology convergence, have broken the barrier between producers and consumers. The main characteristic of contemporary consumers is that they have acquired the right to store, produce, and share information, especially with the support of the Internet. Toffler (1980) used the term *prosumer* for the first time in his book *The Third Wave,* in which he predicted a fusion between producers and consumers because of the deep changes in the social, communicational, economic and technological aspects of contemporary society. Afterwards, Toffler recognized economy in three different moments. Briefly, in the *First Wave* or agricultural wave, non-paid invisible labor is predominant and people are considered *prosumers* because they produce for their own consumption. In the *Second Wave* or industrial one, the market is organized in a way that the industry (producer) manufactures goods to sell to consumers in order to make profit. During the Third Wave, the *prosumer* becomes visible again, once due to technology one can produce goods, services, or information (TOFFLER, 1980). Tapscott and Williams (2010) created the term *prossumption* to demonstrate the phenomenon that *prosumers* not only consume, but also produce. According to the author, sharing is the basis for this interconnected generation.

However, what implications does this new scenario bring for education? We have to bear in mind that the changes in the communication networks lead to consequences for the

learning processes at schools, because learners are not passive consumers/receivers of knowledge anymore. It is necessary to analyze to what extent the concept of *prosumer* can be applied to classrooms, since it broadens and diversify the nature of interactions that take place in such learning environments where students not only consume, but also produce information. Hence, in the next section we problematize this concept more deeply.

2.3 New roles for students and teachers

When Tapscott and Williams (2010) defined the *Generation Z* or *Generation Next* as *The Digital Native*, i.e. people who were born from 1998 on, the authors have contended that while this generation was born immersed in the technological context of multiple screens and is able to deal with the interactive networks naturally, we adults had to learn how to manage and adapt to these technologies. Because of this clash of generations, the teacher-centered model of education as knowledge "transmission", in which students are passive viewers, becomes obsolete, since it does not fit the students' interests anymore.

Concerning this scenario Cope and Kalantzis (2008, p.201) argue that

> As a part of this process, the viewer becomes a user; transmission is replaced by user-selectivity; and instead of being passive receptors of mass culture we become active creators of information and sensibilities which precisely suit the nuances of who we are and the image in which we want to fashion ourselves.

According to this view, students use their agency to participate actively as coauthors of knowledge in the process of meaning-making, and also to construct self-images that fit the multiple identities that they assume when interacting in the network society. In this sense, teaching English critically also means that we teachers must be aware of our practices, be critical about ourselves and constantly (re)negotiate roles in the classroom. Considering the technical aspects of teaching, Pennycook (2004, p.7) has stated that learning to teach is "negotiating ways of doing this with our past histories, fears and desires; our own knowledge and culture; our students' wishes and preferences; and the institutional constraints and collaborations". Moreover, Kumaravadivelu (2012, p.5) corroborates the idea of renegotiating roles when the author defends the concept of *epistemic break* as a re-organization or re-conceptualization of knowledge systems, *"when new epistemological orientations appear with a considerable degree of regularity"*. This epistemic break should take into account the horizontal relations between teachers and students rather than the usual top-down hierarchy at schools. As Hawkins and Norton (2009, p.6) have argued, if teachers aim to apply a critical teaching that empowers students so that the power relations in the classroom are restructured, these relations "must be structured on equitable terms" to give voice to learners and to encourage them to recognize the legitimacy of their contributions for learning.

3 Conclusion

Due to the characteristics of the contemporary scenario of the networked society, in which the communicational barriers are overcome, it is necessary to rethink the hierarchical teacher-centered model of education whose paradigm is based on the unidirectional communication from one to many. Rather, it would be important to reconsider the roles of teachers and students to promote a classroom atmosphere where all participants of the learning process are in an integrated network, whose center is everywhere and ever-changing. In this new classroom architecture, the teacher is not the center, for everyone can be on the spot all the time, in a way that exchanging information emerges naturally in a place where many can communicate with many both synchronously and asynchronously. Furthermore, this learning environment counts on the agency of learners who are not passive observers anymore. On the contrary, they are knowledge '*prosumers'*, since they receive, but also produce, resemiotise, exchange, and pass this learning on to their classmates.

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