

New designs for new identities: Are we going anywhere?

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In a world of uncertainties, one thing seems certain: Information technologies are here to stay—and to stay in permanent change. Such an apparent contradiction between permanence and movement may not sound contradictory anymore as we get used to the fast pace of the globalizing world, moving from one technology to the next. In this world, knowledge needs to be conceived in a way that caters for the new societies that produce it, their organization and organizing principles, and their needs for producing and/or distributing knowledge.

Societies are constituted by people with diverse identities formed both in the particular ways in which each person relates to the world, and in our collective, social ways of knowing. Our identity processes simultaneously put forth individual and social aspects or elements, while establishing interactions among them that connect the local and the global, sometimes in a conflicting relation, challenging their background assumptions and their identity-building processes simultaneously. This process of reflectively engaging with the world, both locally and globally, is what makes us learn and change; what offers us the possibility of learning/changing ourselves and helping others to learn/change themselves (Freire, 1998). Such interaction has been more and more incorporated to contemporary ways of knowing through the popularity of new media (Snyder, 2004) and the multiple perspectives on knowledge they make possible.

In the digital world, we simultaneously access many interpretive communities that use different lenses to interact with our particular ways to see the world, activating specific interpretive frameworks made accessible to the 'wired generations'. Our ways of making meaning are no longer limited to verbal written language: images, sounds, video clips, virtual animation are but a few examples of new technologies that unfold new ways to produce new knowledges. Multimodality, hypertexts, databases, and interactive websites all transform our meaning-making processes and our ways of relating to knowledge—even for those who are not directly in contact with new technologies but are affected by their implications, since "technology adoption transforms the very nature of pre-existing social practices" (Braga, 2007, p. 80).

Our ways of understanding others and ourselves and of relating to one another have also changed, along with how we face our possible identities and the processes of their construction. Identity building now moves through highly varied and simultaneous paths, through discursive genres that intercross and change as they give rise to new ways of knowing. Our physical bodies no longer impose barriers to where we go or what we do: Our disembodied virtual identities open wide the possibilities of encountering otherness. Immediateness and simultaneity characterize our virtual exchanges—both in written and oral language—in processes that transform verbal and non-verbal ways of communicating.

Paul James Gee (2004) has widely discussed how literacies, old and new, affect our identities and the ways we produce and distribute knowledge. For him, old capitalism has "academic language" as its most important gateway to economic success and sociopolitical power, thus constructing a world of prestige connected to the use of a certain worldview and the development of a certain type of identity:

that of a “rational, generalizing, deductive, ‘generic’, ‘disinterested’, asocial and acultural pursuer of fact and truth” (p. 280). In order for such persona and the worldview it brings along to be sustained, certain forms of literacy have to be praised, taught, acquired and obviously maintained. That is what education seems to have been doing in the last centuries: reinforcing academic language and its accompanying worldview and persona, not attentive to the fact that academic language is just one form of literacy (even if a very important one for the legitimacy of social practices) among many others people have been using in their interaction with the world (Snyder, 2004).

Society has changed, new technologies have become more accessible and new demands and ideals have been projected to individuals. Gee (2004, p. 286) refers to the generations born after 1982 as the Millennials: children and young adults that populate our classrooms with new desires. In the Millennials’ world the most important (and most discriminating) ability is the “ability to design” (Gee, 2004, 284). Gee characterizes this ability as having three important dimensions. The first relates to identity: newer generations expect—and are expected—to be able to deal with the processes of (re)conferring identities and identification procedures to people, products and ideas. In other words, products themselves are less important than the identities constructed around them. The second aspect is the ability to design affinity groups and refers to the need for constructing “communities of practice” (Bauer et al., 2006; Wenger, 1999), where each person brings their own knowledge and ways of knowing to the group, building a space where there is no single source of knowledge and where the group’s way of knowing is dynamic and collective: “built up by daily practice and stored in the routines and procedures the group has evolved” (Gee, 2004, p. 285). Finally, the third dimension of the ability to design is the establishment of networks: the need to be in contact with as many people or companies as possible, and to form multiple nodes in large networks to receive the highest amount of information. This concept of networking does not necessarily imply affinity: A network can be simply characterized as individuals relating to each other, connected in similarity as well as in difference. Such aspect confers difference a very important status, since the “diverse others” in the multiple nodes of networks help to constantly add the unfamiliar to the picture, and thus to keep learning new things (Gee, 2004, 286). This ability, or way of knowing, has been made possible by the perception that there are multiple ways of constructing, organizing and accessing knowledges—databases and hypertexts are good indicators of that. The new technologies or new media (Snyder, 2004) have facilitated such perspectives, giving us effective examples of shared knowledges (such as wikis and blogs) and multiple ways of organizing them.

Such needs, Gee continues (2004), are seen by Millennials and their parents as not being catered for by schools, which are considered important only as educational credentials (especially those offered by elite institutions) and perceived as crucial to higher positions in the new capitalist world. The spaces where designing skills are actually learned and developed are taken to be the “home, [in] activities, camps, travel and [on] the Internet” (p. 291). Thus, if the role of education is to help students to engage with the world, education becomes relevant to people’s lives and effectively helps students construct themselves as designers. We have to remember that in contemporary society there are as many literacies as there are different sociocultural practices, different discourses, and that it is high time we turn to these new literacies developed alongside our schools, rather than ignore them on the grounds that they do not comply with our noble educational principles of yore. To say that education needs to engage with students’ lives is not to say that it needs to comply with pre-determined views of what the world should look like, but to emphasize that formal education needs to interact with the

world, to take into account that there is a world outside school (defined in terms of physical space) that is not external to it (defined in terms of cultural space).

In order to be able to promote change for a freer global society, educational institutions in general (including universities) must be perceived as useful sites for the development of critical awareness, for the (de)construction of meaningful perspectives to our existence as a whole, not simply as places for assimilation, adaptation or the fulfillment of bureaucratic requirements (It strikes me as meaningful that one needs to make it explicit that universities are thought of as “educational institutions”, especially for those cultures where higher education has been treated as an industry, as a business where the students are clients and professors are expected to obtain financial resources to their employers). By useful I do not refer to the utilitarian or instrumental aspects of learning, but to education coming to occupy an important place in the process of developing engaged critical citizens who can act in today’s world, transforming or maintaining it based on informed decisions and collaborative thinking.

Such restructuring needs to take place in our episteme and in our attitudes towards knowledge and ways of knowing. Foucault (1972) conceives of epistemes as systems of categorization through which we name the world, and that, according to da Silva (1999, 254), “allow or stop us from thinking, seeing and saying certain things”. If the restructuring does not happen at this level, change is likely to be limited to the surface when what we need is a radical change that moves from “doing better things” to “seeing things differently” (Sterling, 2001, p. 28), and redesigning our educational systems and institutions instead of simply improving and restructuring them. Different ways of knowing and being in the world are interacting more intensively through new technologies, and creating conflicting identities that force us to look differently into how subjectivities are formed and into the nature, production and distribution of knowledge in the virtual encounter of different cultures and societies—virtuality conceived here not as the opposite of reality, but as a specific digital way of constructing possible realities (Jordão, 2007, p. 7).

These new perspectives establish different relationships among learners, teachers, professors, knowledges, disciplines, departments, languages, cultures, countries, nations. Such relationships need to be more dynamic and less hierarchical, so that the knowledges that are produced and circulate in our educational institutions can move away from the traditional linear structure of learning towards the development of an ability of constantly redesigning “new identities, affinity groups, and networks” (Gee, 2004, 284). Such ability has already been developed by the ‘wired’ society and materialized in the use of different digital languages (Monte Mór, 2007) and interactive software that allow the perception of other ways of knowing (such as those promoted by digital hyperlinked texts, interactive simulation games, blogs, RSS feeds, web portals and platforms). Once integrated into our more formal educational structures, it could enable schools and universities—as well as the subjectivities that inhabit them—to work collaboratively rather than competitively, to establish as many nodes as possible in their networks, to be able to relate, adapt and adjust, as well as to change and transform both inner and outer worlds.

How do we develop such ability? Where do we start? A change in attitude is needed in many walks of life, and some individuals and agencies have already been taking their steps (see Sterling, 2001, p. 61-76). Such epistemological change in attitude is needed especially on the part of universities, because they are the legitimized loci where professionals are formed. Such institutions occupy a privileged position in our old capitalism (still alive “as foreground information in the ‘developing world’

and as a background formation in the ‘developed world’”, Gee, 2004, p. 279). These institutions are given the legitimate power to produce and distribute institutionalized and socially accepted knowledge.

Our universities need to undergo a third order change (Sterling 2001) and promote a radical transformation of the worldviews informing their practice, changing not only the organization of the university, but its organizing principles as well, in an epistemological change that places higher education as a meaningful way of knowing. Most of the changes universities have performed in this direction are adaptive, generally limited to infra-structural modifications to include new equipments in classrooms, or to offer online courses in distant education. With the exception of some superficial changes in mode of delivery, there has been no displacement of scholarly knowledge and the ways people, knowledges and ways of knowing are positioned. Professors continue to be the ultimate authority or source of true knowledge, and students recipients of such knowledge; valid knowledge in universities is (to a great extent) exclusively that which complies with traditional academic, ethnocentric, European discourses of science.

Having established the theoretical background against which I consider the need for change in our discursive representations, I believe we are ready to construct a shared understanding of my experience and the knowledges acquired from it in the implementation of alternative classroom practices based on the OSDE methodology and its principles in a formal classroom environment in Brazil.

Alternative Practices

The OSDE methodology has represented, in my personal context, a way to promote in our épistemes what Sterling refers to as ‘third order changes’ (Sterling, 2001) by ways of instituting practices that radically transform the traditional subject positions assigned to stakeholders in higher education, and collaboratively recreating the ways professors and students relate to each other and to disciplinary knowledge. So, let us proceed to a narrative, from my point of view, of how such changes took place in my classrooms.

It is 2005 and here I am, facing a group of 23 students at the end of their undergraduate experience with EFL in a large Brazilian urban setting. I am aware that some cultures have been using the words “second” and “additional” rather than “foreign” to refer to TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages). However, I prefer to maintain the term “foreign” when referring to the Brazilian context because English is not used for communication neither within the country (as seems to be the case when the words “second” and “additional” are used) nor inside the classrooms where it is taught/learned. I also believe that this difference characterizes the need for a different educational approach and diverse aims to each situation, but that is a discussion for another article.

My group of 23 students had gone through a difficult process of selection to enter the only public university in the area three years before, a university rated among the top in the country. These students have also been exposed to a number of different university courses and professors by now, and have probably been adapted to mainstream academic discourses, since they have managed their way to the last year of the course.

Their expectations for this course, as they tell me in our first meeting, are to develop fluency, practise English in conversation classes, expand their vocabulary and to “think in English”. Language courses

like this are not usually expected to be grounds for learning things other than “language itself” (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and therefore, that is what they expect from this course. However, I expect a little more than “language learning itself”: As a researcher on critical literacy I expect in fact a lot more from my encounter with students. Well, I guess we will have to negotiate our expectations.

After a brief conversation about our experiences at the university and in our classrooms so far—both as students and as teachers (many of my students are already teaching EFL in language institutes)—we decide that it might be worthwhile to experiment with something more challenging than the usual transmissive approach to learning, and we agree to take risks in the process. I tell students about the OSDE website and give them time to go through the pages and materials there. In our next meeting, we discuss the OSDE principles and choose to attempt at turning our meetings in this course into open spaces where we allow ourselves to question and be questioned. All is running smoothly and we seem to reach consensus as far as our aims and pedagogy for the course are concerned. There is a feeling of comfort that comes from attaining consensus, accompanied by a sense of expectation in the air.

In the position of professor, I will be in charge of preparing, coordinating and evaluating our meetings. After all, I am supposed to know the approach better; I am more used to the principles and methodology; and, most decisive of all, I am supposed to be in charge anyway (a tacit agreement in the educational system that is taken for granted). I set out then to choose the topics to be discussed, to prepare the materials, to conduct the discussions, trying to guarantee that we have an open space for dialogue in this classroom. I am also, of course, the one in charge of the evaluation of students as well: I am expected to provide them with language feedback and suggest ways in which students should improve their language abilities. Therefore, I present to my students the evaluation criteria to be used during the course: This criteria is entirely based on language proficiency as stated by European organizations such as the University of Cambridge Language Examinations Studies (UCLES) and Association of Language Teachers of Europe (ALTE). Their legitimacy is recognized by all, unquestioned in their status, and they are to be maintained during the whole course: Evaluation is to be based on language development and is entirely in the hands of the professor.

Rules thus established, our meetings and experimentation with the OSDE methodology begin. However, we soon realize that the challenge is more difficult than it initially appeared to be. Questioning others is something we are used to doing—even if silently, only to ourselves. But being open to questions is a totally different matter. Most of us are teachers, and students question us all the time—we should be used to it. Yet, this kind of questioning is different from what is going on in these meetings: Students are not simply doubting their professor’s knowledge of the subject-matter: They are also challenging my attitudes toward life, my values, my moral principles, my interpretations of life. It is all very uncomfortable because it brings up the possibility that I might be wrong, that I might have been constructing my world on procedures that do not work as well as I thought they might. What then? How can I continue to be the professor figure that ‘carries the wisdom and deep knowledge of the language’, culture and pedagogy that my students will need to be good professionals in the future (phrases within quotation marks in this section were used by myself and students during our course)? How can I teach for the future if I do not have a ‘solid interpretation’ of the present? Or clear understandings of what the future might bring to us all? What is my position then, in the face that

students know more than I do in many aspects, including the English language I am supposed to be teaching them? What is going on here?

What about the students themselves: Should they go on 'making their professor suffer like that'? Making their classmates question their dearest values? Subjecting themselves to seeing their deepest truths questioned by their classmates and professor? Is it really worth it? Won't this attitude of questioning create a much more uncomfortable world for them to live in? Why create problems where they do not exist? Why add more problems to an already troubled world? Perhaps it is not worth it. Are we really 'learning anything'? What is it? To adapt to discomfort and pessimism?

Should we take back what we first agreed on? Or keep pursuing this until the end of the course (it's only 4 months, after all). Perhaps there is a way out of this without explicitly having to change the course procedures or quit the course, which would run the risk of losing course credits? Our questioning attitude can be kept superficial and restricted to the classroom walls; if we don't let it go beyond the twice a week meeting with this group, we might be safe. We might reach the end of this course safe and sound, all of us. Just follow the professor's instructions, do not allow this "questioning thing" to go too deep or expand, and we'll all be safe.

But it is not so simple: We find ourselves thinking about assumptions and implications of many other things outside the course environment. It is as if this attitude has contaminated our interpretive procedures. Important questions seem to constantly arise, uncontrollably; questions that are intriguing as nobody seems to find a proper answer for them. And instead of giving them up, we keep looking. We also find questions that we cannot always formulate or exchange clearly, but that keep calling us from time to time. We start wondering about the impact of such principles when they are subliminally transferred to other contexts, to other courses at university, without a collective negotiation to transform a traditionally closed space into an open one. How would different professors react, how would they have to change in order to be in line with these principles? What could we learn from this? What would we miss in relation to the way things are? How different is it really from the usual practices at university? What does it change in the way we see knowledges and ways of knowing? Should we really give up our privilege and unlearn the practices that place us as superior to others?

These questions allow a lot of debate and speculation and experimentation, as some students go about trying to negotiate the 'closeness' of other spaces in their lives outside this course. As the course develops, we take moments to debrief and discuss what is going on and how each of us is feeling. These questions all come up, voiced by our previous educational experiences and the uneasiness this approach is causing in us, and after two months we decide to change the course of events.

Rather than having the professor prepare, coordinate and evaluate the sessions alone, we decide that there should be more active participation in the process from the part of the students, who agree to take turns and share with me the responsibility of 'collaboratively' planning and conducting each meeting. For each of the following meetings, then, designated students and the professor collect materials and think together about the activities to be developed with the group. The students and the professor conduct class discussions together, and evaluate each meeting with the whole group. Language is not assessed in terms of accuracy and fluency anymore (although we still discuss different language uses in terms of their relation to a supposedly standard English), but rather we

consider the different ways in which students participate and engage with the issues and how this is demonstrated differently in the way they use verbal and non-verbal language. There is a combination of professor, self and peer evaluation: Written feedback is given to students and myself by the whole group after each meeting (and that includes—but is not exclusively made of—language comments from the part of students and professor).

This second part of the course seems to have worked better for all of us. The group experienced more variety of approaches and our different understandings of the OSDE principles were negotiated and put to practice. The issues selected were more relevant (and also broader in that they were not restricted to the professor's own understandings of what students needed) to the group as a whole, and not limited to 'academic' issues as those chosen by the professor tended to be. We moved from an evaluation centered on skills and accuracy to one based on principles and critical literacies.

There were basically two great lessons I learned from my experience with the OSDE principles. One of them is the need to understand our contexts and to use open questioning strategically. Many of us find it difficult to avoid the experience of asking questions and challenging assumptions after it has been triggered. However, some do learn to analyse their contexts, managing to decide whether or not to keep the inquiring exercise as an inner process in spaces where it is not safe or strategically sound to explicitly challenge established practices. And others end up quitting it altogether, concluding it is better to 'always play it safe'. Some students did seem to limit their critical procedures to the texts used in this course, refusing to take it to other areas of their lives and thus restricting their own transformation to a first or second order of change, in which they keep doing either more of the same or the same, only better (Sterling 2001). Others, feeling prepared to manage their crisis and convinced that conflict is a condition for learning, move on to a third order change and start interpreting things differently, using different interpretive procedures to understand their worlds. But it all amounts to what Freire (1998) so wisely referred to as the impossibility to teach, or to make people learn – it is people that learn things, when they are ready and when conditions suffice.

The other lesson I learned from my students is related to how far my position as a university professor can be used to justify the imposition of learning/teaching procedures. It is important not to silence students, but, instead, to respect collective decisions by being open to negotiating and renegotiating rules whenever one of us finds it important to do so: to negotiate 'for real', as a collective process of struggling for common understandings, rather than as an individual action of giving up. When things get difficult and we do not 'win a negotiation' process, when we have to submit to a decision we do not agree with, many people simply tend to give up and quit the course, change it back to its traditional classroom procedures, or simply leave the group and abandon the ship. While that can be done, of course, 'to save one's own sanity' – and many times those of others, attempting to help rescue the boat by staying on it as long as possible before drowning might be more rewarding and represent our openness to difference and our ability to try to understand different perspectives. Still, both opportunities might be granted, which is not always easy to do in educational contexts where the same discipline is always taught the same way, by the same professors. The experience with OSDE has also helped me to fight for constant alternation in the pedagogical approaches used for the different compulsory courses in our curriculum at university.

It feels good to see many of the students who have been exposed to the OSDE principles and practices continuing their studies after graduation, and some of them deciding to pursue research on

open spaces and critical literacies in EFL, apparently intrigued by the potential of the methodology and its assumptions.

Concluding Remarks

Our students (and future scholars) have been bringing to our classrooms new ways of knowing, including those learned with the language of new technologies, such as wikipedia, blogs, and simulation games. Their learning processes refuse to be confined to the formal spaces created or accepted as valid by educational institutions. Knowledge comes from multiple sources and relations, not only from professors and canonical theories and practices. Subjectivities are constructed virtually, as conflicting, provisional discursive interactions, subject to multiplicity and dynamism (Bakhtin, 1988). However, our universities refuse to value that knowledge and the ways of knowing that make it possible, seeing them as a threat to the pecking order where professors sit at the top. Abandoning such positions, as the OSDE methodology incites us to do, leads to much higher productivity in the engagement with a plethora of ways of knowing that can benefit everyone, rather than just a few legitimized academics. Our increasing contact with different cultures in the world has demonstrated the productivity of engaging with multiple ways of knowing. Formal education has to open up to epistemological diversity and difference, as well as the constant challenging of institutionalized interpretive procedures, or it will be regarded by society as an old-fashioned, outdated way of knowing whose sole contribution to the world is as a historical reminder of what it should not be.

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