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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### MAKING WEBLOGS, PROMOTING AUTHENTIC ACTIVITY IN SCHOOL

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#### ABSTRACT

This article presents the partial result of an ethnographic research developed in an urban school in Funchal, Madeira, Portugal. The researcher and classroom teacher analyzed the reports of classroom life as students manipulated the technological tools - weblogs - and developed actions that broadened the curriculum. Weblogs were a vehicle of communication between school and the world, created and maintained by students. This action constituted an authentic activity, according to Lave, (1988). We presented two episodes of the students during the construction of a weblog about wrestling. As a result, we reflect the nature of collaborative learning in constructivist / constructionist learning environments and the role of technology in contexts of authentic activity.

#### INTRODUCTION

We present the partial result of an ethnographic research that describe and interpret the emergent culture in the classroom of the 4th Year of Primary School as well as the roles assumed by stakeholders, when the students the teacher and the researcher were involved in tasks on weblogs. The ethnographic methodology was developed according to Lapassade (1993) and Fino (2000). The students organized the learning according to the work culture of the pedagogical model, *Movimento da Escola Moderna*. This model is based on a democratic project of cooperative self-training of teachers, transferring by analogy to a model of educational cooperation in schools. It is a sociocentric model defending a democratic and cooperative practice in the management of contents, activities, materials, times and spaces (Grave-Resendes, 2002). It consists of active and differentiated methodologies of school work, fostering the democratic participation of students, living in cooperation in the classroom, as well as in the various contexts of school and community life. It is initiated by the needs and interests of the students through a contract and follows processes of continuous negotiation of temporary resources and school contents. This pedagogical model aims at the involvement and co-responsibility of students in their own learning in an inclusive education perspective.

In this article we will not explain this pedagogical model. Initially we negotiate with the student's weekly work times to build and maintain updated weblogs. At other later times we shared their opinions.

#### **Authentic activity and school activity**

Authentic activity is defined as the habitual practice of ordinary people within a culture, arising from real situations. The school activity is that which is developed in the school context. (Lave, 1988). According Lave, learning is an inherent phenomenon of practice and as such inseparable from it. In this way formally, similar problems are considered different depending on the actions and contexts in which they are developed. These situational specificities include the relationships between people, activities, contexts, and are implicated in the failure or success of individuals' actions. Normally, the School tends to separate activity from the context in which learning occurs, creating a conflict between authentic activity and school activity, passing on the idea that knowledge is self-sufficient from the situations in which it is learned. The school activity results in the decontextualized practice of the real, although inserted in the school context, verifying a breakdown between the external context and the context of the school (Fino, 2006). There is a conflict that results from the distance between the social context, given by the action of the learners in real situations and the school social context resulting from the decontextualized school activity of the real (even if inserted in the school context). School activity assumes a hybrid action because it is built within the school

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culture, but its intention is guided as if it were happening in the real culture. To this end, teaching methods that separate knowledge and doing contribute to knowledge, regardless of the situations in which it is used. The activity and context in which learning takes place are considered pedagogically useful but neutral in relation to what is learned.

When a transfer of authentic activity to the classroom takes place, the contexts change and this activity becomes part of the school culture. Students develop a substitution activity. Their learning and use remain closed in the school system, contrary to what could be assumed in relation to the objective of schooling. For this reason, there is a difference between school success and actual success. As we have seen, the construction of knowledge is a situated phenomenon, being a function of the activity, the context and the culture in which it occurs. The school cannot reproduce everyday situations and therefore cannot prepare for life outside the school world. As a result, success within the school culture has little to do with performance in real contexts. So how to minimize this phenomenon? What is the role of technologies? ...

### **Constructivist / Constructionist learning and the role of technologies**

The construction of knowledge using the computer was denominated by Papert by the constructionism (Valente, 2000). The construction of knowledge occurs when the student constructs an artifact of his interest and for which he is very motivated. This is the result of learning in a specific context, where, in collaboration and through dialogue, students form and test their constructions - social negotiation of knowledge (Papert, 1991). To this end, school learning contexts need to be learner-centered and should involve cooperative problem solving. This urgency is based on constructivist assumptions that emphasize the learner's active role in building knowledge, in interaction with the world and with others. Interaction is mediated by cultural artifacts and tools, of symbolic structure, such as language, software, internet or a weblog, for example. The role of the teacher should be to ensure the quality of educational environments by providing cognitive nutrients from which children can build learning (Papert, 1985). Technology has the potential to promote new forms of social interaction and various modes of communication and collaboration.

Computers can help create new learning environments in and out of classrooms whenever: (Thin, 2005).

- In the hands of learners, they create new contexts of learning;
- The discussion of subjects is combined with more flexibility and transdisciplinarity, by the students;
- Students do not respond to mass education and develop autonomous learning paths;
- Allow direct access to sources of information that the school does not have, eliminating the teacher's role as the only source of knowledge;
- Allow students access to the cultural plurality of the world.

### **Weblogs and the constructivist/Constructionist environment**

Weblog is the abbreviation of two words in English Web (network) and Log (logbook). In Portuguese, the term can be

called "blog". Weblog presents an asynchronous communication model. Weblog has become one of the most popular publishing formats on the Web and has been able to promote its own culture compared to other systems of page creation and communication between people. Blogs are socio-technological, communicational and connective artifacts, oriented to multi-situational practices, balanced between personal and relational, in the field of connections called the blogosphere (Estalella, 2006). The use of weblogs in education needs a constructivist support to understand it as a process and product, analyzing it as a communicational tool (Lara, 2005). Weblogs can help build a new methodology, offering its format and dynamics in experimenting with new educational environments. In a constructivist pedagogy, the weblog can be understood as a personal means of the student expressing the experience of his / her learning, creating knowledge in the social interaction with colleagues, teachers or other individuals. Teachers act as mediators, facilitating the instruments and guiding learning. Competence in the use of digital technologies and Web tools is critical to this action.

We were convinced that learning could present the constructivist assumptions (Hatano, 1993), (Fino, 2000):

- Learners are active, like to take initiative and choose from several alternatives;
- Learners are as active as competent in the task of understanding, and it is possible to build knowledge based on their own understanding, beyond this knowledge, information provided by the teacher, or even beyond the teacher himself;
- The student's knowledge is facilitated by horizontal and vertical interactions;
- The availability of various sources of information increases the construction of knowledge.

## **RESULTS**

In this article we mention two episodes only with the WWE - Luta Livre, a weblog about wrestling, built by the students during the observation period. That situations appear to be able to explain the phenomena under analysis, recorded by the researcher as a participant observer, in his research diary. WWE-LUTA LIVRE - wrestling - was created at and can be viewed at <http://westling-wwefjv.blogspot.com/>. The blog's subtitle expressed the students' intention to share a taste for wrestling: *"Hello we are João Juvenal, Vitor Nunes, Kiko Xavier and Diogo and we will talk about wrestling. We hope you like it. Read comments on our weblog"* (Diary, March 7, ap1). The blog remained active between three months, with eight publications made. The images predominated the communicative message. The text was always very concise and contained brief explanations about this modality, showing links to the SmackDown website [www.smackdown.com](http://www.smackdown.com)

### **Episode 1 - Getting familiar with English on Smackdown website pages**

Behavior of two student's authors of the WWE Luta Livre - wrestling weblog while doing research on the internet:

*"Vitor and Juvenal were working on the Luta Livre Weblog. They did some research on the internet. Diogo joined later. I noticed that Vitor copied the typed words and pasted them into the Google search field. I asked him why. He replied that this*

was faster. I think it would also be because they were less fluent in English. To show better performance he took on the task of translating webpages from English to Portuguese for the two colleagues. This was not the first time he did it. The previous session also happened. Vitor read the titles and phrases from SmackDown's page, translated and explained aloud as the two colleagues waited attentively at his side. He did the translation by context. Juvenal sometimes asked questions. I realized that they consulted in detail. They consulted the information of each SmackDown player on <http://www.wwe.com/superstars/smackdown/boogeyman/>

One of them had a face painted red with tattoos in black and many worms hung in the mouth:

- Buuu ... how unpleasant! said Kiko.
- Boogeyman and his Worms. It's Boogeyman, he brings those worms to scare, said Vitor.
- I approached Vitor and asked him where he learned English so well. He answered me - at home - probably with family members or else in self-learning by the need to decode the internet pages." (Diary, March 14, ap2).

## Episode 2 – Confronting different points of view about wrestling

Wrestling was very popular for students in that class. The WWE Wrestling blog has evidenced this popularity. That made the teacher uncomfortable. In one of the weekly brainstorming sessions, she expressed her concern about the great participation of the class in the event, since there was a belief among the colleagues that the exhibition of these events favored the violence already present in that school in the playground. The teacher decided to leave a comment in the WWE Luta Livre – wrestling, weblog:

*"Hello friends! I personally do not appreciate this fight as I find it very violent.*

*Anyway, I cannot give my opinion on something I do not know. I do, however, think that the way they wrote the text does not clarify very well the people who do not know the program. I think they should be more careful when writing the text because it is very confusing. I look forward to further clarification on the subject. "*

Comment [helenabarbosa said ...] [07/03] [10:14 PM]

In the March 3 Cooperation Council, one of the topics of the discussion was the reflection on the popularity of wrestling and the appearance of the WWE weblog - Wrestling. This reflection of the group is mentioned here:

*"The session was moderated by Sofia and she started reading short articles on how she had run the week. The starting point for this topic was a sentence I put in the class diary:*

*I noticed that the WWE Wrestling weblog has a lot of popularity in the room. I would like to know what students think about wrestling and their players. "After reading this introduction, Juvenal immediately wanted to intervene to warn the teacher not to comment on subjects she did not know. He also explained that he likes wrestling because it's fun. Then he talked about the players' achievements. The teacher replied*

*that she had watched TV shows this week. Tomás talked about the situations he had seen on TV. Kiko also talked about the commercial aspect of the events.*

*Juvenal once again discussed the feat of the players and the plot that the show presents. There are friendships and enmities between players, loyalties and betrayals that then originate the fights in the ring. The teacher asked who saw the wrestling. Almost all confirmed watching the program. She also wanted to know what they felt when they watched. Juvenal and Nuno said that show gave them "the pleasure of laughing". Catherine said she did not believe in the veracity of these confrontations. Everyone had the same opinion, except for Valter who believed that they were truly fighting. I asked the students what they thought about the discussion of this matter in the Cooperation Council. Nuno made this intervention: "We hold meetings to discuss our problems and learn to live in citizenship".*

*Vitor also said: "TV News is more violent." Then he spoke about the theme of the week on TV - the physical aggression among the deputies in parliament. Vitor presented examples for which I also have no answers. "(Diary, March 14, ap3).*

In the blog Digitar, the teacher wanted to make a comment later:

*"It was very important to discuss wrestling in the Council. If, on the one hand, I was very worried when a student wanted to do a blog on this topic, now, reflecting after the fact that I did well not block this initiative because, like John Juvenal said, "when we work what we like to work with much more interest" a lesson in pedagogy that I had heard many times, but which, with such enthusiasm, this student made me think again. I was surprised when, at the last meeting on Friday, a number of students reported that they had not seen a lot of free wrestling yet. I told them that I was very happy whenever one of them told me that I did not participate on my own initiative and not by prohibition. Every time I believe that through dialogue we go much further! "[Helena] [published by Projecto Enter] [25/03]*

## Conclusion

**In the first episode**, the task of reading and translating words and phrases from English to Portuguese was assumed voluntarily by Vitor, feeling that the group's colleagues demonstrated the need for this support. The contextual translation expressed the most utilitarian way by Vitor to solve his problem. It was an authentic activity, since the purpose and processes used were fully developed and controlled by apprentices. The students constructed knowledge based on their own understanding, surpassing this knowledge the information provided by the teacher, eventually exceeding the curricular objectives. Technology provided the three elements of the group with access to information and the opportunity for them to learn.

**In the second episode**, student's empowerment in the argumentation, without, however, fail to respect other points of view. Respect for different opinions led to the learning of citizenship, as Nuno said. In this community, the learning of citizenship was a daily work. The experience and the reflection of the real situations presented authenticity, being the processes conducted and controlled by the students.

Knowledge building by the students was facilitated by the interactions between colleagues as well as with the teacher. The WWE Luta Livre blog was the driving force behind the group-mediated discussion and enabled the construction of knowledge. Weblogs helped create a new learning context; gave more flexibility and transdisciplinarity in the topics covered; autonomous learning paths; have allowed direct access to sources of information and cultural plurality of the world from the student. The opportunity to develop authentic activities in the curriculum, such as building weblogs or reflecting in a group, has brought meaning to learning. If the construction of blogs and the use of the Internet are currently an integral part of the daily life of students, it is pertinent that the School intends to be a continuum of their experiences. That school is your life too.

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