Chapter IX
Microcultures, Local Communities, and Virtual Networks

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ABSTRACT

Through a case study, we will exemplify how information communication technology (ICT) can be used in a collaborative way to constitute the foundations of intercultural projects in local and global communities. First, we present a local learning community based on the fifth dimension model where, adopting a collaborative model, each of its activities departed from the traditional teaching–learning form based on transmission. Collaboration mediated by ICT in local computer-supported learning communities, understood to be borderer zones that are not the exclusive property of any one specific cultural group, has the potential to generate genuine neocultures in which participants can share meanings and appropriate artefacts. Second, the same approach is adopted to analyse the dialogue established between educational researchers and technologists. Setting out with different goals, both groups engaged in a borderer activity involving the development of educational artefacts that could be accessed via the Internet. Common participation in those activities gave rise to a set of shared beliefs, knowledge, behaviours, and customs, that is, a network of meanings that crystallised into a common microculture.

INTERCULTURALITY THROUGH TRANSMISSION

In an earlier study (Crespo & Lalueza, 2003), we analysed a group of schools in Barcelona where all of the pupils belong to minority groups (gypsies and immigrants) in social contexts involving the risk of exclusion. Analysis of school practices allowed us to identify two main obstacles for the inclusion of pupils: The implicit representation of cultural differences as deficits which undervalues pupils in their role as legitimate interlocutors; The use of an educational model based on transmission which impoverishes the role of pupils as agents. The first impediment can be found in the teachers' discourses, where children's difficulties are represented as an individual handicap whose origin would reside in a deficient family context. Children and families are thus defined as lacking, for example, knowledge, so that the school is presented as the supplier of knowledge in a monopolistic regime, without recognising the role of the family as a generator of useful knowledge, and lacking habits and norms of behaviour, so that the school needs to discipline both the pupils and the parents, in such a way that controlling their behaviour is the principal objective, and making recourse to the authorities when the school cannot cope.

Furthermore, the consideration of cultures as essential traits leads to the negation of the joint construction of meanings. Differences are interpreted as the distance they must cover to change or adapt to our setting. Therefore, the responsibility lies only with them. This perception of cultural differences leads us to a fundamental issue: the failure to recognise the other as a legitimate interlocutor. In this way, the relations maintained with the children and their families occur in absence of dialogue and collaboration. For these children, school seems a hostile environment that is imposed upon them. Without sharing goals, it is more difficult to construct shared meanings and, therefore, meaningful learning.

The second of the obstacles consists of the predominance of an instructional model based on a theory of transmission (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996), in which schoolchildren learn information and show that it has been codified and retained through certain evaluation tests that reproduce what was learned "piece by piece." The transmission model is based on a series of implicit beliefs. It is supposed that there are a number of prior agreements between the teacher and the pupils. These are never made explicit as they are considered obvious. On top of this supposedly intersubjective basis, new knowledge is deposited. Actually, a whole series of implicit negotiations occur, which are mediated by the teacher's authority. As the explicit goal is the correct codification of knowledge, whether teachers and pupils share meanings or not is of secondary importance. Indeed the meanings originating from the behaviour of the community of schoolchildren count for nothing, and are even considered a disturbance if they contradict or hinder the reception of formal knowledge. Pupils are not considered interlocutors, and in the absence of active participation; the appropriation of tools and contents becomes an arduous task.

To conclude, the combination of an ethnocentric representation in which differences are considered deficit and the transmission model of learning leaves no place for interculturality, beyond folkloric and noncontextualized actions. In the following section, we are going to describe a practical experience with an alternative model, mediated using ICT tools, and a collaborative approach that recognises the existence of a range of sociohistorical contexts that provide different sets of meanings. As opposed to the transmission model, this model is based on participation, in which the process of teaching and learning involves the creation of a new context, or a *microculture*, in which each new meaning has to be explicitly negotiated.

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