

Chapter 12

Transparent Classrooms: How the Mobile Phone is Changing Educational Settings

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the use of the mobile phone in Portuguese classrooms in order to examine new practices of disclosure and transparency. A literature review provides a global context of the nature of the mobile phone, and contextualizes an overview of the current usage trends in Portugal. The high uptake rates of mobile phone usage in Portugal means that this country can be considered an interesting case study for the usage of mobile phones in educational settings. Evidence of a young mobile culture gathered in recent research studies conducted at the national level and on a qualitative case study of high-school teachers, provides a basis for a practical discussion of the impact of the mobile phone on the Portuguese education system. Building on the views from different actors- students, teachers, parents, and school administrators- the paper closes with the proposition of the mobile phone as a valid educational tool that requires new skills and strategies for a successful integration.

THE NATURE OF THE MOBILE PHONE

Our lives are increasingly performed within a mobile context. The mobile phone is with us, on our every step, from the time we wake up to its ring, to the time we go to sleep, after sending

our last text message, and even during our sleep, while it stands (turned on) on our bedside table. There is unanimity regarding the profound impact of mobile communications in the way we live, interact with others and see the world (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). We live by the mobile phone and construct meaning through it.

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Mobile phones are part of the life of societies around the five continents and, despite their cultural differences, those populations seem to converge to a common set of practices, concerns and negotiations of time, space and identity in what concerns the use of mobile communications (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). The mobile phone also presents symbolic aspects in different cultures and groups and is closely related to aesthetics and fashion, presenting itself as a cultural object. Mobile phones are personal but not individual objects; they are collaborative tools, used for the creation and management of networks and communities that can be instantaneously formed.

The mobile phone is also a creative technology that allows users to create and share their contents: pictures, videos, music, games: “the cell phone allows the reception, like the book or the radio, and production, as the camera (and) allows it instantly, at long distances and interactively” (Levinson, 2004, p. 53). It reinforces the expectations and needs of a new generation that feels empowered to create, to have a voice, to participate. Through its multimedia capabilities and the possibility to connect to the Internet and access other information repositories such as *YouTube*, the mobile phone has allowed its users to become content producers and to instantly and permanently share their information and emotions. This has happened in such a way that we can feel disconnected from our social network when we are deprived of its use or when we lose it.

Mobile technologies are not new. Newspapers, magazines, books and radio were already mobile. What is new is the possibility to reach a person and not a place (Feldmann, 2005). In that way, the mobile phone is seen as a highly personal object, an expression of a person’s identity. However, Lasen (2002) calls attention to the fact that although mobile phones are personal, they are not individual but, instead, collaborative tools of network creation and management.

The meaning of the mobile phone is not just utilitarian or instrumental, but also emotional,

entertaining and educational. The mobile phone is a multifunctional and multidimensional artifact that induces profound changes in our context: new uses of time, new ways of interacting with others and the end of space barriers between the professional and private, work and play, teaching and learning.

We can also regard the mobile phone as an affective technology (Lasen, 2004), an object of mediation, demonstration and communication of feelings and emotions. The mobile phone is not only an extension of its user but its virtual presence. Furthermore, the mobile phone is conceived as a visible prosthesis of the body in the McLuhan sense of extension, thus “its shapes and colors become subjects of aesthetic reflection” (Caron & Caronia, 2007, p. 18) and identity construction.

The mobile phone is also used to obtain a sense of security, to coordinate daily activities and to keep ourselves at reach independently of time and space. Mobile technologies have privatized the public sphere (Ling, 1999). With mobile technologies we reconfigure our public space, we build walls where they do not physically exist but we also tear them down. Feldmann (2005) has noted the hybridizing of public and private space as one of the main characteristics of the mobile communication system. The mobile phone has accentuated the characteristics of the “Network Society”, as a society of variable centers and margins. The hierarchy of spaces is no longer subdued to geography but to the variable geometry of the information flows (Castells, 1997).

The concrete implications of this variable geometry are great but one of the most important for our object of study is the diversification of work places and the end of the physical barriers between space/time for work and space/time for leisure, private affairs and family. Today it is expected of us to be available any place, any time. The time we knew that was linear, irreversible and measurable is being transformed. To this new conception of time that Castells calls “timeless time”, referring to the breach of sequenciality in social actions, be

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