

IT ADOPTION IN GREEK SECONDARY HUMANITIES EDUCATION. ISSUES AND REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The training programs in ICT carried out in Greece were addressed to secondary education teachers and aimed at the application of technology in schools. Language and History are two primary examples of this application.

Though Greek educators still focus on the student's final product, it is interesting to witness the transformational power of the editing stages of a text written with the help of a word processor. The ease with which students make changes liberates them and allows them to focus on the concepts being discussed.

The Web's great strengths in becoming a teaching and learning resource for the history classroom are the frequent updating of the material on line and the low cost of the information available. Students are provided with the ability to seek historical information in specific web sites, applying at the same time the same methods they would apply when examining documents in an archive, while developing a systematic search strategy and good enquiry skills.

The role of ICT in classrooms is to contribute to the evolution of teaching theories and the development of new educational techniques. The information society program, provided that is coupled with teacher training, offers a chance that should not be lost. In this article issues resulting from

the convergence of new media technologies and humanities education are discussed. Our focus lies in the attempt to trace changes that this process undergoes under the impact of multimedia technologies. The introduction of ICT in the discipline of history has raised many questions about the nature of historical narrative.

INTRODUCTION

As we enter the new millennium, the Greek school is encountering a challenge. New technologies are here with a distinctive vigour as it is in their nature to weave the networks that link us to a new society. It is our duty to positively respond to this novelty, although not uncritically, so that New Technologies acquire the place they deserve in the educational process. It is not, however, the tool that will transform the school; it is its use. And there we should be careful. The question is quite complicated as it re-defines the role of the educator in the emerging information society.

The task of integrating Information Technology (IT) in Education in everyday educational routine is certainly not easy. In the last five years, a series of training programmes were carried out in Greece. They were addressed mainly to the teachers of secondary education and aimed at the application and exploitation of technology in schools, not as an autonomous subject, but as part of the individual subjects of the curriculum.

A great number of educators did not hesitate to admit in their interviews that they considered the decision to change their teaching methods a very difficult one. The innovation of IT and its integration in the curriculum requires careful planning and the relevant preparation while at the same time demanding a large amount of time on the part of the teacher.

The vast majority of educators that participated in experimental teachings in the school lab required insistently the presence of a second teacher in class so that student group work would be facilitated. They also asked for timetable flexibility so that a two-hour period would be available for each session.

Quite a few educators remain observers, facing the whole task with scepticism. However, the longer one is involved in the process of activity planning with the support of new technologies, the more one discovers methods of refreshment of one's teaching practice.

Greek and international bibliography on the change of the attitude of educators towards teaching methods all converge that teachers in general do not change easily either their way of teaching or their instructive and pedagogic habits. Changes in this respect require a long time, that is to say, teachers need to be able to see, and be convinced for correctness and effectiveness of a new teaching method before they put it in practice (Giakoumatou, 2003).

ICT IN TEACHING LANGUAGE

I believe we all agree that the new types of texts, such as the hypertext or the multi-modal texts, require different reading approaches. Today texts communicate with us in many ways: with their fonts, with the images that frame them. The comparison of two instructive handbooks, one of the past decades and a modern one, will disclose the difference. A "dry" text today is repulsive for students who are bombarded by images in their everyday life. Text multimodality is an aspect investigated nowadays by experts in the fields of education and communication (Kress, 1995 Shapiro, 1996 Snyder, 1998 Berger,

1998 Ann, 1997). The widespread use of images not only in advertising but, more generally, in the new technologies of communication showcases the demand for student training in the reading of these new texts (Giakoumatou, 2000, Giakoumatou, 2003).

Text analysis will have to include not only their linguistic elements but also the non linguistic ones (the type of images as well as the place and the space they occupy, the type of font, the colours used). Due to the rapid developments of technology the text has evolved in our days to incorporate audiovisual stimuli. Multimodality stands out as a fundamental parameter of each text (Hontolidou, 1999) and we, teachers, must provide our students with the tools that will help them decipher the messages that surround them. The visual message is addressed to a completely naive and hence vulnerable recipient. We have often come across written texts accusing the students of "lack of critical spirit"; the question however arises: "what have we done for the visual education of our students?" It is not possible for education to direct the visual messages, but it can "work" on the filters of their perception. The convergence of technologies, telephone - television - computers, allows the evolution of language and puts into question our fundamental beliefs for the role of written expression in teaching. The sovereignty of hypertext through the development of internet leads us to a world where the word is a link to another text, image or sound. The criteria that we used for text analysis are no more applicable. The traditional rules of paragraph syntax do not help us anymore. How can we analyze an electronic text, the limits of which are no longer distinguishable but fluid? Why shouldn't a text on the Parthenon, which also includes a photograph of the monument, offer students the possibility to "surf" all the modern temples of the Hellenic area as well as to compare them with the temples of Greece through the centuries? There are researchers (Dyer, 1990) who claim that as images tend to dominate, the problems of a universal language that presupposes globalisation through the neutralization of communication are blunted. On the other hand, however, let us not forget that the perception of a picture is often the sum of our cultural values.

A common misapprehension among educators is that software will replace their teaching. Those who

have somehow dealt with IT know that such software does not exist. What exists is software that can support the educational process. The word processor, for example, can support the teaching of a paragraph in the subject of essay writing. Seldom, however, has it been used in schools involved in pilot programmes, perhaps because it does not have a glossy paper wrapping. On the other hand, it does possess features that can be put into good use in the teaching of language courses. I believe that all teachers, we will agree that the transformational power of writing during the educational process is overlooked in the Greek school. I mean that we are mainly interested in the results - the work of the student in its final form - and we pay no attention to the process of writing. It is interesting to witness the transformation of a text through its editing stages (multiple drafts) as well as to proceed to text evaluation by the students themselves. Peer evaluation is interesting for students. The educator becomes a member of this community, facilitating the quest, just like other members do, and not focusing on the number of errors. Occupation with the subject is prolonged but at the same time the students' awareness of the communicative role of the text is increased. Provided that we succeed in involving our students for a longer period of time in the writing process, then automatically we have increased the period of time when students "learn" (Giakoumatou, 2001).

From the moment writing is made easier with the use of a PC, the educational process of essay writing is facilitated as well. For every stage of the writing process (collection of material, composition, correction, notification to the public) there also exist corresponding functions of the programme. (Frame, various drafts, checking the successive corrections (Nikolaidou, 2001).

Many a time our students have difficulty beginning their essay. We could suggest they follow a procedure that will facilitate them as a -one for all- recipe does not exist. Some students work with a plan, others function better with automatic writing. We could discuss which method works best for each one drawing on our experience. Naturally we should not overlook motivation, and we should provide suitable stimuli and ideas for reflection with regard to the topic. Reviewing is an activity that takes place throughout the writing process. Changes happen

every minute and at no cost - the text is fluid and changes are not time-consuming. The ease with which we make changes, liberates students who begin to focus on the concepts being discussed (Daiute, 1985). Now we have at our disposal a reference text easily visible by the teacher and the students. The corrections are facilitated as students distance themselves more easily from their text. We need to be careful, however, so as to avoid automatic writing and the lack of careful planning on the part of the students.

Electronic mail facilitates communication between schools. The students, in real communication conditions, acquire incentives to improve their written expression with the teacher as a facilitator and they learn through an active process of knowledge construction. A collaboration between schools where students exchange opinions and review books of literature that they have read is under way. The students' interest is further enhanced by the possibility of communicating with the writers themselves since many of them have a personal web site (Nikolaidou, 2000).

ICT IN HISTORY DIDACTICS

The integration of ICT in the teaching of history involves a series of changes in the methods and tools of school history. It is not an exaggeration to speak for the creation of a new learning environment where the transfer of information is replaced by its quest. The Internet is quickly becoming a new teaching and learning resource for the history classroom. Its great strengths are that much of the material on the web is regularly up-dated at relatively low cost and the information available is in digital format so that text, images and sound can be downloaded for use in the classroom or for incorporation in the school's own website.

Many lesson plans on our official educational portal are web quests. Teachers strive to provide students with the ability to seek historical information in specific web sites. The effort of the Foundation of the Hellenic World to host Greek History in the Internet is commendable (<http://www.hellenichistory.gr>). Teachers agreed that

students of history using the web need to apply the same methods as they would apply when examining documents in an archive, reading eye-witness accounts, analysing records or studying the memoirs and diaries of people directly involved in a particular historical event. Perhaps more than any other resource the Internet reflects the pluralism that characterises the study of contemporary history.

Another type of activity that is common in our portal is the processing of numerical data or demographic material in a spreadsheet. It is of great interest that many school websites create collections of extracts and whole transcriptions from a wide range of primary source documents. By giving access to such a diversity of sources and perspectives the web can also provide the history student (and the teacher) with opportunities to practise the skills of the historian. Effective use of the web requires a systematic search strategy and good enquiry skills. The searcher needs to understand the distinction between primary and secondary sources.

A number of history teachers (sometimes with the active assistance of their students) have also created their own websites, which combine their own notes, worksheets and student handouts with material downloaded from the Internet, usually including links to other websites that they regard as useful for their students.

Teacher support material has recently been added in the Educational Portal of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. (www.e-yliko.sch.gr/support.htm). We now offer our visitors access to material of varied form; for instance they can easily have at their disposal maps, photographic material, and sound material. Extracts from speeches of famous men and historical videos are also available in our portal. In the last five years plenty of history journals have also made their material available through the web.

The computer, compared with other means of educational technology, has the advantage of combining all the characteristics of audiovisual means with unlimited possibilities of interaction.

Educators try to visualise the concepts so as to become more knowledgeable and to create common reference points for all their students. Technology comes to our assistance with virtual reality that can be incorporated in the teaching process in a particularly efficient way. The Foundation of the Hellenic World has also developed virtual environments both in its headquarters (the cultural centre "Greek World") - the representation of Ancient Miletus is impressive - but also in the web where we can virtually visit the Epidaurus theatre. Of course beyond the first impressions, it remains for us to enhance the historical quest and thought through the appropriate activities that we will propose to our students. The multiple representations of the cognitive subject, the opportunity that the student has to investigate it and the collaboration with the persons involved in the same activity, all promote knowledge.

The traces that human societies leave are characterized by exceptional diversity. In the 20th century written sources have incorporated sound, photographic, and cinematographic evidence that are also considered historical sources. Yet sources are utilised only through the questions that we, the educators, pose about them; hence the role of the educator remains pivotal for the achievement of our teaching goals and we should therefore dispose of our fear of being displaced by the "machines".

CONCLUSIONS

Certainly IT does not constitute and should not be viewed as panacea for education. Its role is to contribute to the evolution of teaching theories and to the development of new educational techniques. Many claim that we find ourselves in the first stages of the third and greatest revolution, after the rural and the industrial one; that is, a technological revolution which does not provide an extension to our muscular system, like the previous ones did, but to our mind.

New technologies provide our students with learning incentives, mainly through their multimedia and interaction potential. In the theoretical courses they facilitate communication and expression both in the classroom and among the educational units while

improving the management of informative material as well as exploratory learning. Learning is shifting. As our students grow up in the new digital media they have learnt how to find something and use it in a new way and in a new context. A dimension Seely Brown (1999) addressed as bricolage. He also suggests that new forms of learning are based on trying things and action rather than on abstract knowledge.

The e-learning programme offers a chance that should not be lost. The electronic environments of communication usher us dynamically into a new globalised communicative environment, into an area of exchange and co-habitation which requires a common language for collaboration. Networks take dexterities and sentiments and change them into goods: they distribute them and give them added value. But networks want soul. There is no doubt that we will come across many difficulties in our path. What we all wish is that each one of us is given the opportunity to contribute with his or her power towards the renewal of education in Europe.

It is true that technology requires virtue and boldness... so tortoises, start your engines!

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She contributes regularly to educational journals on the introduction of new technologies in secondary education. She maintains a personal website, (www.netschoolbook.gr), which caters for the

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