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ICT at the Classroom

2004-02-06

Some reflections on New Technologies applied to Language and History Didactics
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Integration of the ITE

The task of the integration of the Information Technology in Education (ITE) in the educational everyday routine is certainly not easy. In the last five years, a series of training programmes were carried out. 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 cognitive subjects of the curriculum. A lot of educators that participated in experimental teachings in these programmes asked insistently for 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 in the school lab.

A lot 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 ITE and its integration in the curriculum requires careful planning and the relevant preparation while at the same time it demands a large amount of time on the part of the teacher.

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.

We know from the Greek and international bibliography related with the research in the change of attitude of educators - with regard to their teaching methods - that teachers in general do not change easily either their way of teaching or their instructive and pedagogic habits.

Changes in this sector require a long time, that is to say, the teachers need to be able to see, and apply in practice, a new way of teaching and they need to be convinced for the correctness and

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“ *A lot of educators did not hesitate to admit in their interviews that they considered the decision to change their teaching methods a very difficult one.* ”

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the effectiveness of it (Giakoumatou, 2003).

Teaching language beyond the linguistic elements

I believe that we will all agree that there have been introduced new types of texts that require different strategies for their approach, e.g. the hypertext or the polytropic texts. The texts today communicate with us in many ways: with their fonts, with the pictures that frame them.

The comparison of two instructive handbooks, one of the past decade and a modern one, will show the difference. A dry text today is repulsive for the student who is bombarded in his everyday life by pictures. Text multimodality is a sector that is investigated nowadays by experts in the fields of education and communication (Kress, 1995 Shapiro, 1996 Snyder, 1998 Berger, 1998 Ann, 1997). The widely spread use of picture not only in advertisement 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 photographs as well as the place and the extent they occupy, the type of font, the colours being used). The text evolves in our days because of the rapid developments of technology and it incorporates 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 reveal the messages that surround them. The visual message is addressed to a completely naive and therefore 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 questions 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, to a picture, to sound. The criteria that we used to apply in text analysis do not cover us anymore. 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? In a text on the Parthenon where its photograph is included, why shouldn't there be the possibility for the student 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) that support the opinion that as the picture tends 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 the ITE will 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 the pilot schools, 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 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, as the 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 communication 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 facilitated 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 times 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 frame, others function better with the spontaneous writing. We could discuss what functions for each one drawing from our

experience. Naturally we should not overlook motivation, and we should provide the suitable stimuli and ideas for reflection with regard to the topic. Review is an activity that takes place throughout the writing process. Changes happen every minute and with no cost - the text is fluid and the changes can be afforded. The ease with which we make changes liberates the student who can now pay closer attention to the substance of his text (Daiute, 1985). Now we have at our disposal a reference text easily visible by the teacher and the schoolmates. The corrections are facilitated as the student distances himself more easily from his text (Koutsogiannis, 2000). We need to be careful, however, so as to avoid the direct writing and the lack of careful planning on the part of the student.

The electronic mail facilitates communication between schools. The students, through real communication conditions, acquire incentives to improve their written expression with the teacher as a helper and they learn through an active process of knowledge construction. A collaboration between schools where the students exchange opinions and review books of literature that they have read is under way. The possibility also of their communication with the writer presents interest as many writers have a personal web site (Nikolaidou, 2000).

The New Technologies in history didactics

The integration of New Technologies in the teaching of history involves a series of changes in the methods and the 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. For example, the software "Mycenaean civilisation" that is used for the teaching of the corresponding unit invites the student to a virtual excavation where he has the chance to discover findings, to describe and classify them, to formulate theories and questions and to answer them with scientific data. The student has the sense that he works the same way a historian does as he investigates the sources and answers the questions that arise.

The Internet provides students with the ability to seek historical information in specific web sites. The effort of the Foundation of the Hellenic World to host the [Greek History](#) in the Internet is commendable. The students can even process numerical data or demographic material in a spreadsheet. A relative activity is developed in the [website netschoolbook](#) for the historical demography of Ermoupolis, Syros.

In the web we have access to material of varied form; for instance we can easily have at our disposal maps, photographic material,

and sound material. Extracts from speeches of famous men and historical videos are available in a lot of web pages. Teacher support material was added recently in the [Educational Portal of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs](#). In the last five years we also saw plenty of history journals making their material available through the Internet.

The computer, compared with other means of educational technology, has an advantage as it combines all the characteristics of audiovisual means with unlimited possibilities of interaction. All 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 base (the cultural centre "Greek World") - the representation of Ancient Miletus is impressive - but also in the internet 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 promote knowledge.

The traces that human societies leave are characterized by exceptional diversity. In the 20th century to the written sources there were added sound, photograph, cinematographic evidence that stand out as historical sources. But of course the sources are utilised only through the questions that we address them; therefore the role of the educator remains pivotal for the achievement of our teaching goals and we should dispose of our fear of being displaced by the "machines".

Certainly the new technologies do not constitute and they should not be considered panacea for education. Their place is to contribute with the means that they offer to the evolution of teaching theories and 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; a technological revolution that comes to give extension no longer to our muscular system but to our mind.

The new technologies provide our students with learning incentives for our students, 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 they improve the management of

informative material as well as exploratory learning.

With the programme of the information society, provided that this is coupled with teacher training, we hold in our hands 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 living together which requires a common language for collaboration. The internet takes dexterities and sentiments and changes them into goods: it distributes them and it gives them added value. The networks want soul. It is certain that we will meet many difficulties in our path. What we all wish is for each one of us to be given the opportunity to contribute with his or her power towards the renewal of education in Greece.

It is true that technology requires virtue and boldness...

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