



FROM DECODING TO READING... and online!

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Summary

This work aims at highlighting the critical reading in online courses and the quality of printed/printable texts presented in these courses; the act of reading as well as the presentation of the text are discussed in this paper. Foucault in Les Mots et les Choses (1966) describes Velásquez's work Las Meninas showing how people are real participants of whatever is painted, written, sung, or any other form of communication, because they have different ways of interpreting the same text, or painting, etc. Teachers should be aware of how to evaluate the way they ask questions about a text their students have just read. The presentation of the text as printed material in an online course is important because teachers need a text to present their subject and students, on the other hand, need this material to study, so it should be interesting. Holmberg (1985) and Landim (1997) say that the main point for actual learning is in guided conversation and in interaction. So, printed material as part of a course must be of good quality aiming at the interaction teacher / student / tutor / monitor making their relationship much easier.

This work aims at highlighting the critical reading in online courses. Reading can be done online or not, but the act of reading as well as the presentation of the text are discussed in this paper. First, some ideas about reading and then formulas (not magic ones) about how to publish a text online.

Reading is an activity literate people do every day. The definition of reading involves several characteristics. It is defined 'by the looks, the perspective of the person who looks, who sees an object, a text, verbal or not. That look may be direct, askew according to the reader, the spectator, the observer, the person's baggage of life, the social context, moment and space, objectives, conscious or not.' (Coracini, 2005) It is developed in three steps, according to Coracini. The first step is decoding - the reader understands the words and sentences while reading. This means that the reader (he or she, from now on, just he) can read and knows what he is reading but he is not interested in the text, in its meaning. This person just reads and does not care about what he is reading, or what difference this text can make in his life.

The problem found in many schools is that the first step is still the only one accepted because it is easier for teachers to control the students' answers, and even their understanding. For example, in a text like this: *"It was late at night. The thief was watching the house."* Many teachers ask questions about the words in the text: *"Who was watching the house?" "What was the thief watching?" "When was the thief watching the house?"* All the answers can easily be identified in the text; the student has no problems in finding them and the teacher has no problems in correcting the exercise. It is the teacher's voice and opinion being heard. The exercise depends on information clearly written and found in the text.

Secondly, there comes comprehension – the reader decodes the text and interacts with it. The short story *"The Rescue"*, written by Millor Fernandes (1999) can be used to illustrate this step. A grave-digger was digging a grave and he dug too deeply, he found himself stuck in the bottom of the grave, he could not climb up, so he cried for help. Finally a drunk man appeared and thought the man in the grave was dead, despite of the fact that the man was speaking, and started to throw earth and mud on him. That is the end of the story, the end suggested by the author is that the grave-digger died suffocated by the earth. Many students accept this end, when they are asked: *"Do you really think the man stayed there, doing nothing, just being buried?"* Many students say "Yes." They follow the marks left by the author and do not want to disagree with him, or they are so used to receiving ready information that they do not want to think by themselves, this is the so called comprehension. When the other students, who firstly disagreed, are asked about the end of the story, they say that the man could have used the earth that had been thrown to climb up and then leave the grave. Some of them also say that both men could have gone together to a bar to drink beer and celebrate the successful rescue. In this case the readers understood the text, some accept the end, they follow the author's marks, his unchangeable ideas; others do not accept this end, they find another one according to their social-historical context and their baggage of life...

These readers are able to discuss the end and interfere: there is a discussion and a position is taken. This is the part of interpretation, the third step – the reader fulfils the text with his own experiences and personal opinion. He is completely involved in the text, reacts as if it were real and becomes part of the story That is the discursive process in post modernism: Interpretation relates the text to other texts, *'to other discourses, images, feelings, to the huge floating reservation of desires and signs which we are constituted of.'* (Lèvy 1995/98, p.36). Foucault in *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966) describes Velásquez's work *Las Meninas*



(1656) showing how people are real participants of this painting, and for extension, of whatever is written, photographed, sung, or any other kind of communication: the observer is a reader and this

reader needs to be involved with the context in order to understand it. People who see this painting are indispensable, because they have different ways of interpreting it, and it is the same painting. This may happen with another painting, text, song, photo, message etc. The person who sees this painting, according to Foucault, can see himself in the centre of the work of art, together with the Spanish King and Queen, who are, in fact, the models of the painting. The royal couple are reflected on the mirror and it is on this mirror placed in the centre of the painting where you “can see” yourself. And the artist looks at you, so you are part of the work of art.

When it comes to the reading of a text it is important that the reader feels himself in the centre of the plot, he is able to think and interpret the facts in the story as if they were part of his life. Then the reader feels comfortable to discuss the text, understanding the feelings and needs of the characters. Now the marks left by the author are not important anymore, the reader interacts with the text. According to Bakhtin, (1995, 1997) *humans have the habit of making narrow interpretations*, and he refers to *the social character of the language facts. is opposing to speaker's word a counterword... the different voices, echoes remembrances...*

The teacher/tutor has to allow the students to express their counterword, searching the meaning of the text through remembrances, social-historical moment and their own knowledge. This is a difficult role for the teacher to play, because the students' ideas vary according to their own memories, thoughts, ways of seeing reality or fiction. Even when a teacher works with problems and formulas, historical facts, geographic accidents, science news, he has to be careful with the way he asks questions about the subject being taught. The students can answer the questions using their own ideas, not wrong ones, but differently interpreted. Example of a proposition for children, in Ghiraldelo (2002) ‘Complete the page with the letter “a”. ‘All students wrote: a – a – a – a from the first to the last line, as expected; but a student wrote one capital “A” on the whole page. This is unexpected. Is this student wrong? Where is the problem? The child interpreted the proposal on his own, the way he thought was correct. Thus, one concludes that reading is a subjective act, influenced by the social environment the reader is familiar with.

According to Moran (1998) building knowledge nowadays means understanding every dimension of reality, capturing and expressing this totality in a complete and wider way. Cross (1976) says that *‘the main concern in education is learning, and it is known that each one has different styles of collecting and transforming information into useful knowledge.’* So, as each student has his own style and rhythm of learning, the provider of materials needs to use different kinds of activities rewarding each and every student, and also must be aware that writing is a social process because it involves a reader who is attracted to the relevant ideas exposed in the text. Holmberg (1985) and Landim (1997) say that the main point for actual learning is in guided conversation and in interaction. So, printed material as part of a

course must be of good quality aiming at the interaction teacher / student / tutor / monitor making their relationship much easier.

The text is the basis for any didactic material, so it is important to think that in online courses texts must be well written and motivating. The interest of the student/reader has to be captivated every moment. *'The material used in the course is significant because it is a source of language, learning support, reference and it motivates and stimulates the students.'* (Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998)) There are some rules for writing this kind of material. In *La educación a distancia y la Uned*, Garcia Aretio (1996) says that the words used must be short, concrete, full of meaning, familiar to the students. The sentences must be short and well structured, linked to each other making sense, with verbs expressing action, in active voice and preferably in the present tense. The use of unknown words may jeopardize learning, and demotivate the students. Aretio continues saying that more important than learning a new word, is to understand concepts and ideas through a familiar vocabulary; the vocabulary used can be original or facilitated according to the level of the students.

Any text, about any other subjects, not only literary, chosen to be used in an online course, has to take into account the profile of the students enrolled in the course. This profile can be determined by using a needs analysis questionnaire. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) say that *'...needs analysis is the corner stone that leads to a very focused course.'* Usually the students are already professionals who are trying to learn more to expand their horizons and get a better job. It is necessary to recognize the knowledge and practice they have already acquired before the beginning of the course, and it is important to identify their needs, their wishes, the main objectives that led them to that course. Using this information, it becomes easier to present them good, motivating material.(Oliveira, 2000) One of the problems presented by writers of online materials is the level of the language. Many people write "essays" for the students to read: the language is difficult, the scientific terms are not understood, according to Coicaud (2002), and even the propositions of an exercise or test may be difficult and not clear. The students may have problems in reading and interpreting the text, so they do not learn, they are demotivated and give up the idea of studying.

To insert pictures or not to insert, that is the question! Some writers enjoy inserting pictures in their work, because they think the use of pictures make reading less arid or boring, or a picture can help in the understanding of the subject, or supports the written text and helps developing the students' imagination. Other writers disagree, and say that using pictures makes the material less serious, distracts the students and not inserting pictures stimulates the creativity and imagination. I agree with the popular saying *'a picture is worth a thousand words'*, I use them and do not think they are somewhat childish. Whatever they may be,

photos, caricatures, rough drawings, they help students to understand the text and many times, the students infer the meaning of difficult words, or paragraphs by means of a picture. The shape of the text is also an essential point to be noticed. A page fulfilled with words compressed, squeezed on the screen of the computer is something hard to read and to concentrate on. So, there are certain rules: the text should use only part of the page, about 12cm. On each side, the writer can add extra information, such as useful links, data about the subject, curiosities, pictures, vocabulary, anything the writer thinks appropriate to highlight the understanding. The material writer should always provide a summary of the subject and an activity for the students to remember what they have learned in that lesson. A good material should present graphics, pictures, colours, everything adapted to the course reality and written according to the purposes of the course syllabus. The important point here is that the written material should be presented, as explained before, taking into account the students' needs and wishes, as well as their motivation.

A good text, literary, scientific, about geography, history, biology, etc. should keep the reader interested, bring relevant information, and guide this reader into a new world, where he is able to walk confidently into a social and political environment where he is able to take position and express his feelings because now he is able to really interpret and interact with his readings. The teacher is completely involved in this process, exploiting the text, and performing his role of reflexive researcher, material provider and assistant concerned with the development of the students through the interpretation of the texts used in an online course.

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