

The place of Synchronic in Education. Reflections from the educational action in Times of Pandemic.

O Lugar da Educação da Sincrônica. Reflexões desde a Ação Educativa em Tempos de Pandemia.

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Abstract:

We propose to analyze the online teaching mode and the constitution of the IPECAL community, defining what we call P2P circles as an alternative to the MOOC model in education and its reflexes on the role of the educator, from the specificity that synchronicity can fulfill in an educational project. The present theme emerges from the author's experience as coordinator of a Graduate in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which involves more than 100 students from different countries in Latin America, in particular Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Argentina.

Keywords: MOOC, P2P, Popular Education, Potential Present, Improvisation, Synchronic.

Resumo:

Propomos analisar o modo de ensino online e a constituição da comunidade IPECAL, definindo o que denominamos como círculos P2P como uma alternativa ao modelo MOOC na educação e seus reflexos no papel do educador, desde a especificidade que a sincronidade pode cumprir em um projeto educativo. O presente tema emerge da experiência do autor como coordenador de um Diplomado² em meio à pandemia da COVID-19, que envolve mais de 100 estudantes de diferentes países da América Latina, em particular Colômbia, Chile, México e Argentina.

Palavras-chave: MOOC, P2P, Educação Popular, Presente Potencial, Improviso, Sincrônico.

1. Introduction

The Internet is increasingly permeating human interactions. From enthusiastic defenses like those of Levy (2009) or Castells (1997), to slightly more apocalyptic versions like that of Eric Sadin (2018), the bibliography and reflections on the relationship between human beings and technology are the daily bread of contemporary thought, even more so after the pandemic. In education, it is not an exception. Terms such as E-learning, MOOC or Digital, Transmedia and Media Literacy are increasingly recurrent not only in academic publications, but in terms of investments by universities and private companies. One example is Telefonica, one of the largest communication companies in the world and which has projects like

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² Diplomado é como se chama em alguns países da América Latina o que no Brasil se chama Cursos Livres.

Profuturo³ that serve to show its face of "human capitalism" through digital teaching initiatives. In the field of economics, authors such as Nobel Prize winner Joseph E. Stiglitz (2014) define the need to create a learning society as the axis of economic development. It is not by chance that the relationship of Education and Development is also very present in productions of members of organizations like the World Bank. As the thinkers of New Italian Labor (Blondeau, etc., 2004) and Srnicek (2018) have already translated well, we have gone through a change in the profit matrix of capitalism on a global level. The profit structure now involves obtaining an ever more precise systematization of the global knowledge produced on the networks, either by data accumulation or by content production, to acquire large parts of the digital terrain and sell it to whoever wants to use it. So, what seems at first sight radically new issues are not so much. The silicolonization of the world (Sadin, 2018) continues to be colonization and, in turn, the "uberization" trends of the world are no more than Ruy Mauro Marini described as over-exploitation (Marini, 1991).

From this perspective, it is necessary to reconnect the thread of history and reinterpret the Latin American critical tradition to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world. It is not the concern of the Internet and teaching distance in this field today. José Martí in 1894 had already defined the need for "traveling teachers" as a solution to the problem of education in Latin America. Salvador Allende tried, in 1973, to develop the socialist Internet⁴.

This article is part of the author's theoretical proposal to articulate the demands of digital economy with a historical correlation with industrialization in the 50s and 60s in Latin America. The literacy boom in that period was a consequence of the economic interest in inserting a large number of rural workers into the factory. Paulo Freire, for example, recognized this as an opportunity to rethink the way to teach. Today we have a new opportunity to do the same, since "banking education" (Freire, 1987) is criticized by the same elites, since educational models are needed to help produce information from the perspective of the prosumer (Tapscott, 1995), so that large platforms can perfect their strategies for selling and innovating products from their informational latifundium.

For this task, we propose to analyze the experience of IPECAL (Institute of Thought and Culture in Latin America)⁵, particularly from the coordination position of an Open Course called How to Read the Present? Method Questions.

2. IPECAL as an online community.

IPECAL is a non-profit civil association that has its origins in the Sergio Bagú Circles founded in 1996 under the coordination of Hugo Zemelman. Its main functions are to conduct research projects around the Latin American reality and to teach postgraduate programs. As of the publication date of this article, there were 195 graduate students, 102 students currently studying, 18 researchers, professors or administrative technicians, and more than 24 interinstitutional agreements with universities and research centers. Many of the graduated students continues participating in activities promoted by the institution. There is

³ The program can be seen in detail on your web page:
https://www.fundaciontelefonica.com/educacion_innovacion/profuturo/

⁴ The Brazilian magazine Fórum made an article explaining this issue which is available in the following link:
<https://revistaforum.com.br/noticias/em-1973-allende-criava-projeto-de-internet-socialista-para-tentar-evitar-golpe/>

⁵ www.ipecal.edu.mx

an annual analogical meeting of the Institute, called Latin-American Octobers, but the courses are totally online. Most of the interactions take place in so-called circles, inspired by Freire's theory (1987) and Pichon Rivière (1999), which are synchronous meetings by video calling tools (Skype, Hangout or Jitsi), complemented by instant messaging platforms, mainly WhatsApp. Being an institute with members from different Latin American countries, the vast majority of them relate digitally during much of their experience within the institution. A large part of the community has the first contact online when researching postgraduate studies, mainly through the website and Facebook page, or by referencing two of its founders, Hugo Zemelman and Estela Quintar. If we think of the categories proposed by Rheingold (1993) and redefined by Kozinets (2010), IPECAL can be considered an online community, as it already has a duration over time (over 10 years), with a minimum number of participants, constant contact between community members and with relationships mediated mainly by computers and mobile devices.

The bonds of identity are established since the construction and resignification of the methodological proposal of two of its founders, which are synthesized under the name of present potential methodology and non-parametric didactics. The expressive majority of students and researchers are from the field of education.

Thus, IPECAL can be considered an online community mediated by instant messaging groups and video calling tools, in which its members are largely Latin American educators with learning expectations, either to improve their resume, to research or both. One of the peculiarities of the institute as an educational space is that most of the relationship is among educators and, therefore, it is increasingly focused on being an "education for educators" space.

3. IPECAL as an alternative to MOOC.

MOOC is the acronym for Massive Online Courses, which has its origin in the open courses offered by MIT in 2001⁶. The purpose of MOOCs is to transfer analog courses from universities to digital environments. According to a Telefonica study (2015), this model intends to be the cornerstone of the transformation of higher education. The central feature of this model is, thinking since McLuhan (1962), to be the extension of the auditorium. In other words, to strengthen the exhibition spaces, generally audiovisual, of which students take tests based on the viewing of these videos. One example is the CS50 course at Harvard University⁷. The course when this article was written has had 2,582,304 participants. The Facebook community has 234.900 members. The course consists of recording Professor David J. Malan's classes in an auditorium and program challenges proposed at each session. The interactions in the Facebook group consist, in large part, of specific questions on how to respond to the challenges proposed in the sessions or the publication of a member's certificate when you are able to finish the course.

As we can see from the numbers, it is no coincidence that the model has the Massive concept as part of its nomenclature. The entire model is defined by this characteristic. The evaluations are defined in terms of the best way to systematize the data produced by the

⁶ The original MIT project can be seen here: <https://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>

⁷ The course and its updated data are available in this link: <https://www.edx.org/course/cs50s-introduction-to-computer-science>

users. The expositive and non-synchronous formats of the classes are founded mainly to access the largest number of students. The idea behind this is that "democratization" is synonymous with massiveness. As Philip G. Altbach (2014) explains, this model is not as transparent and accessible as is believed. According to the author, most of the bibliographical references and models of thought and teaching are from the United States or England. Bill Wildavsky (2015) will show us that the average completion rate of the MOOCs he analyzed for that date did not exceed 5%.

Rescuing a terminology from Estela Quintar (2008), MOOCs are the digital manifestation of Bonsai teaching. Their basis is to massify the thinking produced by universities, the vast majority Anglo-Saxon, as the basis of their model for legitimizing knowledge. As much as there are interesting attempts to appropriate this tool from the South, as Minca In Living⁸ did, the didactic devices and internal logic of this model are to accommodate students to what teachers say, using elements of quantification to metriculate how much of the information exposed was correctly transmitted to students. Massive as the structuring axis of the didactic experience conceives the digital spaces as the dissemination axis, as a way to make its world view reach more people. Education based on the Massive is not, therefore, more democratic, because it leads to the constitution of homogenizations. Taking this as a starting point, what do we propose as an alternative?

As previously mentioned, the structuring axis of the IPECAL didactic experience are the circles, as conceived by Paulo Freire (1987). This means that the spaces are based on promoting the discussion of a didactic device (text, video, the life history of an integrant, report of experiences, questions, etc.) and work in such a way that the maximum possible number of participants produces knowledge from this and that the educating community is capable of producing a synthesis of the debate. The coordinator plays a similar role as the moderators of the digital forums, avoiding monopolies of conversations, organizing the distribution of topics for discussion and helping in the construction of the synthesis.

We can think of parallels with the participatory culture of Jenkins (2006), since, in general, coordinators are nothing more than older members of the same community and work to make others perceive their participation as a relevant element in community building. Unlike the massive idea, we may think that the circles favor an idea more similar to P2P⁹, since each member of the educational community participates in different circles, performing different functions. Therefore, knowledge does not spread from one source, but circulates among community members based upon the choice of how these members decide to share it.

The circles are always restricted in size, not exceeding 15 people. Each of these people, as an active part of the community, is a Peer. Returning to McLuhan's metaphor, the circles function as an expansion of the intimate relationships proposed by Paulo Freire's model. To do so in digital environments is to allow for a drastic reduction in costs and the possibility of crossing national borders. Rescuing what José Martí said in the aforementioned work, and

⁸ The course and its updated data are available in this link: <https://www.impactboom.org/blog/2019/2/22/andres-morales-of-living-in-minca-on-the-global-social-enterprise-movement>

⁹ Peer to Peer is a logic of sharing information in which each member of this community transfers directly to the other, without going through a centralized database.

recalling the song at Milton Nascimento's *Bailes da Vida*, digital education here is the educator's effort to get where the "people" are. Like the Literacy Journeys of the Sandinista Movement¹⁰, or the experience of Radio Sutatenza¹¹ in Colombia, it is the effort to shorten the distance by thinking of ways to reach directly the people with whom we want to establish dialogue. For popular education, the digital territory is just one more "ground" that touches the soul. Instead of the dust of the road, the bytes of the nets¹².

Concrete experience has shown that analog distance is not a synonym for emotional distance. For example, in the fifth meeting of one of the groups of the mentioned Open Course, we cried collectively, all connected only by audio and with internet restrictions, having a moment of catharsis about what it is to educate in Latin America from the contribution of a Venezuelan participant.

What we perceive as methodological potential in terms of digital education is to recognize that the dispute between the participatory and the expositive, already explored on many occasions, is still an issue. Unfortunately, many digital education projects that seek to be critical do not reflect on the use of digital tools and end up using them to massify a vertical model of education. If we think of technology as a prosthesis that expands, contracts or alters human senses (Sánchez-Criado, 2008), the educational challenge of the tradition of critical and popular education today is the construction of a chain of affections¹³, which implies working from the P2P logic, that is, distributed networks of information so that it does not come from a single source and in which all members are potential axes for sharing knowledge.

It is important to mention here that the metaphor of P2P is not original, as it has been used on other occasions as P2P Education¹⁴, a non-profit educational association, and P2P Foundation¹⁵, an organization that proposes this term as a philosophy of collaboration. There are even initiatives very similar to IPECAL, such as P2P University¹⁶, which also uses the philosophy of circles and works as a facilitator of analog learning circles mainly in the United States and Tanzania. Another case that would require further study is the People's University¹⁷. In addition to the people directly influenced by the "P2P philosophy", there are different companies, especially consultancies, which apply terminology to their names, such as the financial company P2P Academy¹⁸.

We can synthesize this part explaining that the dispute for education in the digital era involves defining under which concept of information architecture we will share knowledge.

¹⁰ This was a process generated at the beginning of the Sandinista revolution that reduced illiteracy from 50% to 13%, recognized by UNESCO in 1981.

¹¹ Radio Sutatenza was an experience of literacy through Radio, of high reach in the Colombian agricultural sectors.

¹² This part is a direct metaphor of the quoted music, one of the landmarks of Brazilian social music, translated into Spanish and performed mainly by Mercedes Sosa.

¹³ Chain of Affections is a concept proposed by Jaime Batemán, former commander of the extinct Colombian guerrilla M-19, to refer to the set of affective ties that guarantee the life of the individual.

¹⁴ In this link you can check more details of this institution: <http://www.p2peducation.co.uk/>

¹⁵ In this link you can check more details of this institution: <https://p2pfoundation.net/>

¹⁶ In this link you can check more details of this institution: <https://www.p2pu.org/en/>

¹⁷ In this link you can check more details of this institution: <https://youtu.be/6kH-uYwt0qs>

¹⁸ In this link you can check more details of this institution: <https://www.p2p-academy.com/visitor/>

The colonial and capitalist logic will operate through its constant centralization, creating models in which there is a format for the dissemination of a legitimate opinion, as if teachers were the "servants of knowledge", to a large audience that may have high levels of interaction, but as prosumers of content, without really being able to intervene in its construction logic beyond being quantified data that will be taken into account when designing a policy of propaganda and readjustment of content. A model very similar to digital marketing as explained, among others, in the documentary Generation Like¹⁹.

One contribution we propose to critical epistemologies in education is to think about information architecture at the moment of designing digital educational projects from the P2P logic, that is, in circles in which community members transit and are the agents that allow the sharing of knowledge. In addition, we need to answer a concrete problem, which is that of synchronicity.

4. Learning in times of Pandemic:

When we noticed the flood of webinars and other punctual activities in the framework of the Pandemic of COVID-19, in IPECAL we decided to follow another path and offer a Free Open Course on the investigative methods of our institution, lasting 20 online sessions of 3 hours each. In less than 12 hours we had more than 100 registrations, which forced us to quickly close the registrations, in order to maintain the essence of a P2P education like the one we mentioned before. We organized the voluntary participation of 6 researchers of the institute as coordinators of 7 circles in total. We had the constant participation of at least 80 of the subscribers, and requests by e-mails and internal messages of participation from other people who heard about the initiative from any of the members.

For this experiment, we decided to use three technological tools. The first is the Jitsi platform as the "hall" of synchronic spaces. The second is WhatsApp as a call support for students who have worse access to the Internet, as is the case with Venezuela or the indigenous Amazon, and for the creation of a general group, in which the participants themselves end up offering mutual support for punctual doubts, sharing materials, opinions, etc. And the third was to create a static page within the Institute's own web page with the lesson plan and material meeting by meeting.

Thinking from the categories of Carlos Calvo Muñoz (2012), our experience has made us realize that the possibility of digital work allows us to divide the two spheres of the educational act (the sphere of knowledge already determined and the construction of new knowledge from the undetermined). This means that, following Scolari's logic, the historically accumulated knowledge does not need to be exposed in a synchronic space. What is already thought or experienced can be better systematized in text, video, or any medium that seeks to "simplify the complex" (Calvo, 2012). An important point to make in this matter is that, when talking about simplicity, we refer to the idea proposed by Freire when he said "The obligation of teachers is not to fall into simplism - because simplism hides the truth - but to be

¹⁹ In this link you can see the complete documentary: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/generation-like/>

simple. What we have to do is to have a simplicity that does not minimize the seriousness of the object studied, but that emphasizes it. (Freire, 2018, p. 30)

Tutorials of the most distinct types and other contents can be considered more interesting than a synchronic presentation, as they allow the participant to pause, take notes, search the browsers for additional information, etc.

These materials may or may not have been developed by the educator responsible for the educational project. In the specific case analyzed, we rescued 6 texts from the Institute's researchers, designed an image as graphic material to systematize differences between critical epistemologies and deductive theoretical epistemologies, and used a diversity of films, documentaries and texts from other people, because it would not make sense to produce content to speak the same.

Punctual questions are answered by email or WhatsApp as a priority. This allows to leave to the synchronous space the part of the education that concerns the undetermined. That is, the moment of collective creation about what has not yet been said, connecting the singularity of the subjects involved in the act of dialogue, in which the coordinator of the circle does not fulfill another function than that of the moderator in order to maintain the cohesion of the proposal of the meeting and the fair distribution of the space of speech. We were not able to reproduce a non-synchronous space that offered the richness and depth of debate that offers us all being together at the same time, in our case for 3 hours in a row. Making a bet from this educational logic already exposed, we can say that the marvel of technology was precisely to bring that what remains in force as an "excuse" for a synchronic presence is the ritual act of dialogue. Adding to the contributions of Liberation Theology (Boff, 1999), we can rethink the education articulated to Caring, and the educator as:

1. A more experienced member of a learning community, who therefore has some readings or experiences in a field of knowledge and can help navigate the productions already created around this problem.
2. A caregiver who is not focused on persuading other community members that their contributions are the most relevant. Instead, his role is to take on the task of coordinating the collective spaces to ensure that the participants in this space can build knowledge from their singularities. When there is a synchronous ritual act, education is an act of care. Having someone taking care of the space is something convenient, as Carlos Calvo would tell us, but not always the position of the educator will be required for the construction of the educational space.
3. The point of ensuring the internal coherence of an educational project. Every educational initiative has a project that can be personal (a person seeing a tutorial for a particular interest), commercial (a company training its employees to improve its production) or community (the bet that this knowledge will be significant for a collective). Metaphors like the "self-service" education proposed by a Pearson Educational director²⁰ leave room to think about what criteria to choose what to learn or not. To be an educator today is to help make those criteria clear.

²⁰ The complete interview in Portuguese is available here: <https://www.b9.com.br/shows/braincast/braincast-340-a-era-da-educacao-self-service/>

5. Final Considerations:

In this article, we propose that, from IPECAL's experience, we can think of some elements about what it is to digitally educate. The first is to think of the P2P digital circles as an alternative to the Massive model. The second is to think about digital education from the tradition of Popular Education of going to the student instead of forcing him/her to go to the educational institution. The third was to bring a concrete experience that we carried out in the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic to evaluate the still existing role of synchronicity and the existence of an educator.

It is important to emphasize again that this experience occurred within the Pandemic and, therefore, with some specific subjects who have as a condition some additional free time due to this sudden break in routine and minimum conditions of access to Internet and computer. We say this because it offers the need for political dispute over the role of time in education. Here we need to rescue the concept of social moratorium (Margulis, 1998). In summary, the social moratorium means that a social segment, in Margulis the Young, generally male, white and middle class, has the right to an additional time of formation and fruition, because there is a bet that they will offer profits to society for what they learn and experience in this time in which they don't have to work. Historically, this concept is used to define one of the differentials of the social construction of the term youth.

A phenomenon like Universal Basic Income (Moulier-Boutang, 2011) is already being applied in Finland and is being defended by great members of the world economic elite, including Mark Zuckerberg. This means that, in the same system, it is already thought that someone should offer financial guarantees for additional universal free time for training and fun. The Social Moratorium would be assumed by the same economic and universalized elite, because the more time people have, the more they could use their social networks, increasing the concentration of data in the hands of the big Platforms, such as Facebook and Google.

On the other hand, in the Northern countries a dispute about the progressive reduction of the working hours begins, as in the case of Germany to 28 hours per week. The issue of free time is increasingly becoming one of the value delimiters of contemporary capitalism (Broadbent, 2009), and while we continue with extensive journeys in the countries of the Global South, strategies are increasingly emerging to free the inhabitants of the North from this burden.

We consider that with the experience of quarantine worldwide, the dispute over what to do with time has become a matter of evidence. One task for distance education researchers is to dispute the direction of the distribution of this time and the resignification of the work category. We must think about how to move from a Social Moratorium for certain sectors to the right to Time. This goes through various dimensions, such as the struggle for urban reform (less time on the move), decent working conditions, access to connectivity, decent housing, etc. In the specific case of education, we have to rethink what would be the educational time. If we are consistent with the discovery in this experience, the work of the educator will be less and less conducting synchronous spaces.

What used to be the "class" disintegrates into several components with distinct temporalities. In an online experience, it often makes no sense to watch a movie or a video in a synchronic moment. The evaluative activities do not need to be done at the same time, at least within a non-parametric bet that denies the use of standardized tests (Quintar, 2008). And finally, the moments of debate and dialogue themselves are the ones that need people meeting at the same moment.

Less important than whether or not it is by video call, audio or instant message, the rhythm of synchronicity is a structuring part of the symphony that means building new knowledge in a collective way. A symphony that would not be orchestrated, but structured from an improvisation, like Jazz. Just like this musical rhythm, to achieve a virtuosity in the synchronic act, it would take a whole time of practice and active listening of each one of the musicians involved in what they are producing their companions. You can't think that the result of improvisation of a jazz band, or of a samba circle, a battle of rappers or repentistas²¹, is the result only of the time they are producing art at that moment. The value we attribute to this creative capacity is precisely the articulation of previous knowledge in an original way in the present. How to value the educator as a person capable of organizing educational projects that allow these virtuous improvisations? We consider this to be the question that leaves us with all this learning.

²¹ Traditional improvisation rhythm from Brazil.

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