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**Critical Literacies: Brazilian Perspectives**  
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**Critical literacies in the Brazilian university and in the elementary/secondary schools: the dialectics between the global and the local**

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**Abstract**

In the Brazilian university and school environments a long-standing conflict is observed between the objectives and needs of universities and schools. A phenomenological analysis indicates that one of the reasons for this conflict lies in epistemological matters: the universities tend toward preserving the epistemology built into academia, whereas the schools identify that ‘something must be done’ in relation to their dissatisfactory pedagogical results. The conflict suggests that there is a problem in the conception of epistemology and literacy adopted by both the schools and universities. This scenario has been read as analogous to the dialectical global-local relationship, imbued with power and resistance, but also the possibility of agency.

Under the premise that the critical literacies theories (MUSPRATT, LUKE & FREEBODY 1997) postulate the reviewing of educational fundamentals and practices, this presentation discusses then the new literacies (LANKSHEAR & KNOBEL 2003) and multiliteracies (COPE & KALANTZIS 2000) concepts that underlie research as well as new proposals in Brazilian education. It considers the university education for a critical and participative cultural and social practice (GIROUX 2005; CASTELS 1999), according to new epistemological views defended by Morin (2000) which aim to enable the students [and citizens] to know *how to proceed in the absence of existing models and exemplars*, as advocated by Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p 173).

**Key-words:** digital society; digital epistemology; new literacies; multiliteracies.

**Introduction**

Recent research about the Brazilian education indicates both: a high level of dissatisfaction and a gap between what is done in the universities and the schools and what is required for a new society. The research outcome shows: 1) in the surveyed **schools**, teachers promote reading under the premise of information identification, comprehension of given meanings; in the surveyed **university**, students show great ability to comprehend texts seen as the ones of great complexity, however, show great difficulty in meaning making in a multimodal discourse, that requires intertwining experiences of interpretation between texts and modalities. Both schools and university, in my analysis, follow a conventional development of the reading ability, and not always consider that the reading practices in the new society have been changing. And according to my records, great part of the students’

reading today refers to the practices of a digital society in which we see various changes concerning education and epistemology.

Analyzing this picture has been one of the aims of my academic research. The analysis has led to the building of new proposals for schools and universities in Brazil, such as the one fully presented in the National Curriculum Orientations for the Brazilian Secondary Schools: Foreign Languages (2006) (*Orientações Curriculares para o Ensino Médio: Línguas Estrangeiras-OCEM-LE*) published by the Ministry of Education (MEC), under the authorship of Menezes de Souza & Monte Mór.

In this presentation, I would like to concentrate on three of the theoretical conceptions that underpin the cited changes and proposals considering that **meaning construction/meaning making** is one of the abilities valued by researchers and theorists as one of the necessities of this new society: **the social changes** observed in the last decades (COPE & KALANTZIS 2000) occurred as a consequence of technological advances that, by their turn, come to influence and reconstruct language and discourse, as well as social communication; **the epistemological changes** (MORIN 2000; LANKSHEAR & KNOBEL 2003) that constitute the dialectics in the advances of language, technology and communication; the **philosophy of education-pedagogy-practice dialectical relationship** (SAVIANI, 1984) that comes together with the **new literacies and multiliteracies theories**, enabling the desired revision in education.

### **Social and epistemological changes in the digital society**

In the last decades, there have been undeniable social transformations. The social representations have visibly changed, a mostly evident fact that can be noticed in written and electronic media. A comparison between advertisements of different decades would illustrate these differences with more clarity. For instance, the advertisings targeted to the female audience frequently represented women in the features of housewives; presently, women are represented in environments that associate them with other social participations, such as having public jobs. In the school photograph albums, one would often see well-behaved children, sat before the camera in two or three hierarchical rows, in trim uniforms, with well-combed hair, in a representation of school and social values of that age. In this same picture, the female school teacher –one would hardly see a male teacher, then – would tend to place herself in the upper row, signaling the inevitable superiority in the position of any teacher, who should be seen as knower, provider, and responsible for the control and discipline of the pupils. In a current photographic representation, some of these characteristics would not appear, reflecting the changes in the social relations, as well as in the teacher-student relationship, besides the way that teachers and students now deal with knowledge, communication and language.

As for these changes, Cope & Kalantzis (2000) perceive them in an intricate way in the working, public and personal lives of citizens. With reference to working lives, these authors highlight that the era of fast capitalism or post-fordism, both terms imbued with the neoliberal ideologies, praised the replacement of repetitive and underskilled work standards for another pattern that requires multiskilled workers, workers who show diversified experiences and flexibility, able to work in an environment in which flat hierarchy practices have substituted for the well-known vertical hierarchy. In public lives, the authors observe obsolescence in the concept of what ‘civic’ means. In their view, the term ‘civic’, that explains what is connected or related with the city, has been disseminated within a monolithic and monocultural perspective of what should be understood as ‘national’. In this perspective, standardized values undermine dialect differences, for instance. In the words of the authors: “The expanding, interventionary states of the nineteenth and twenty centuries used

schooling as a way of standardizing national languages. In the Old World this meant imposing national standards over dialect differences. In the New World, it meant assimilating immigrant and indigenous peoples to the standardized ‘proper’ language of the colonizer” (p 14). To extend their agreement, I suggest that the current representation of what is civic becomes perceptible in the popular participation in public events or celebrations with which the people find closer identification, and for this reason, widely express their support. To exemplify, nowadays the civic parade to celebrate Brazilian Independence Day on September 7<sup>th</sup> – through which spectators traditionally learned to value or reinforce values such as discipline, uniformity, national symbols – attracts fewer participants, according to media registers, than in other decades. However, the Gay Parade – through which the audience learns about or integrates with diversities, an issue that really matters to them – has enjoyed growing popularity. As for personal lives, Cope & Kalantzis observe that the threshold between the public and the private has gradually turned thinner, considering “the increasing invasion of private spaces by mass media culture, global commodity culture, and communication and information networks”. This invasion results in “culture narratives that are built up of interwoven narratives and commodities that cross television, toys, fast-food packaging, video games”, and so on, as the authors assert (p 16), interfering in and reconstructing beliefs and life courses.

The depictions of changing societies presented by the authors promote reflection chiefly if contrasted with what is portrayed as representative of a network society, as Castells (1999) defines the society that transforms itself with the presence of new technologies, new language and communication modes, and new interactions. In this society, the work world is interested in a productive diversity, requiring that workers be empowered, critical, creative, innovative, because certain jobs and society itself certainly require decision making, initiative, and choice making. However, Cope and Kalantzis would again advert that “these new workplace discourses can be taken in two different ways – as opening new educational and social possibilities, or as new systems of mind control or exploitation” (p 12), leaving a challenging question for reflection: “how do we transform incrementally the achievable and apt outcomes of schooling?” (p 19). In the city living, according to these same authors, the civic sense imbued with the old and traditional patterns and standards of national values does not correspond to the perceptions of citizens in their communities. The civic sense has expanded to become a plural notion, incorporating global and local values, as well as the hybrid of the transcultural discourses, legitimating new civic spaces and new notions of citizenship. In relation to the civic, work and personal lives in the new societies, “the homogeneous imagined community of modern democratic nation states” (p 16) describes more of a desired society than of a real one. An attentive look would surely perceive the multilayered and diversified identities in the multilayered social communities.

In a dialectic process, it is known that the transformations occur on a two-way basis, thus making the transformer be the transformed as well. In this way, the relationships between subject-object, sender-receiver, knower-non-knower, technology-society have merged. On this two-way basis, it becomes difficult, and perhaps somewhat irrelevant, to identify what the starting point of the transformation is. It would sound like an innocuous search, according to certain authors, such as Simon (*apud* Monte Mor 2001), to whom understanding why certain people are included in or excluded from certain communities, social activities and participation may lead to more transforming action than just searching for the origin, the very start of an action, without contemplating the process of social inclusion and exclusion.

An additional aspect in relation to the focused changes themselves would be the understanding that they are not only social but also epistemological. It is known that the mentioned old advertisements – that used the image of housewives to represent the social function of women in society, as well as

photographs of school groups, where one would see disciplined students and teachers that showed control in their environment – were products of a certain production of knowledge, or of a knowledge built within the fundamentals of conventional epistemologies, as it is described by Morin (2000). This author criticizes this epistemology saying that it promotes reproductive education, instead of the development of a creative mind through the pedagogical action. He explains that conventional epistemology concentrates on constructing knowledge according to the principles of *reduction* – knowledge is reduced or fragmented from the whole to the parts – and *grading* – learning is designed in a pre-established scale of complexity that starts from an easy bottom line that gradually advances to more complex levels of difficulty of the subject to be apprehended by students.

Morin's reasoning is corroborated by the studies developed by Lankshear & Knobel (2003) towards what is identified as digital epistemology. These researchers show that the new languages and technologies in the digital society introduce another way of knowledge construction. They also name it as “performance epistemology” and explain it as “knowing how to proceed in the absence of existing models and exemplars” (p. 173). They verify that this way of building knowledge is highly stimulated in the user's interaction with the Internet and in the interactions with the new languages, new language modalities and new technologies to which, in the absence of specific knowledge to a required interaction, the user needs to create his/her own knowing. The authors call attention to the ‘emerging practices’ in these interactions, such as the case of “bricolage” (a practice of assemblage of elements), “collage” (a practice of transferring materials or knowledge from one context to another) and “montage” (a practice of disseminating borrowings in a new setting) (p 173). They represent mental processes that require more capacity for creation, and not only of reproducing models as in conventional epistemologies. In face of the digital epistemology practices, the teaching in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in universities, should be subjected to either reflection or revision, or both, in a way that meets the expectations of the new societies and its needs.

### **(The changes in teaching and education: new literacies and multiliteracies)**

As for the the changes in teaching and education, society has been transforming languages, communication modalities, ways of communication, of interaction, of knowledge constructing at the same time that it is dialectically transformed by these new languages, new communication modalities, ways of communicating, of interaction, of knowledge constructing. The search for knowledge uniformity and for a standard guidance in teaching should thus succumb to a diversity of pedagogical and curricular possibilities which appear to be more congruent with the described changes. It is noticed that in this process the predominance and dominance of methodologies have become less important than the necessity to reexamine practices, with the support of pedagogies and philosophies of education.

In this sense, it is observed that there has been much debate about what is done in classroom practices, contrasting with what is idealized for this same practice. Most of such concerns focuses on the practice, as if it existed isolated from pedagogy and philosophy. However, the concentration on classroom practices reinforces technicist values in which the technique-methodology competence of teachers gains centrality and becomes the indication of pedagogical efficacy and effectiveness. In an analysis of this view of practice, The Brazilian Philosopher of Education Saviani (1984) defends the necessity of apprehending the dialectics within the philosophy of education-pedagogy-practice relationship. According to him, the practice that focuses on itself veils an educational theory and politics that seem to be neutral. However, the apparently neutral practice ideologically acts in favor of an education in which the teachers are seen as the knowledge porters or depositors, those who

know how to explain contents and inherited reality values, notwithstanding stimulating value reasoning and critique by their own students, and many times, not even by themselves. This conception of education would be, then, the one that values clarity in the explanation, and a methodology that eases this objective, influencing the teachers' pedagogical activities only superficially. The superficiality, in this case, would be due to the fact that this concern does not encompass the conceptions of societies, nor of people/citizens that should be developed for these societies, or even the social thoughts and views that should be brought to classrooms. In sum, a technique-oriented practice by itself lacks a critical approach that is often repressed by its reproductivist aims.

The reasoning on dialectics exposed by Saviani, if metaphorically alluded to the image of a tree, would compare the didactic-pedagogical concerns to what has more visibility in the tree. That is, classroom practice (that requires interrogating which practices, approaches should contribute to the education of individuals X or Y, or Z, societies X, or Y, or Z) would correspond to the tree top; its leaves can be seen from a distance. Nevertheless, it should be observed that these leaves are supported by a trunk, corresponding to a pedagogy (that enables interrogating which conceptions, thoughts, orientations are embedded in the education of individuals X or Y, or Z, societies X, or Y, or Z) that, by its turn, is nurtured by roots, representative of its philosophy of education (that enables interrogating which education should be promoted, to which individuals, to which societies?). It should also be realized that this tree interacts with an environment, as well as practice, pedagogy and philosophy of education interact with social, historical and cultural contexts. The dialectics in this metaphorical reasoning may contribute to a reviewing of what is practiced in classrooms, by enabling interrogations in relation to which perspectives, thoughts, people, societies are developed by certain practices that are chosen in teacher education, or when certain teaching methodologies are prioritized. It may, as well, reinvigorate or explain determined assertions about what should be reviewed.

Under the denominations of **new literacies** and **multiliteracies**, these studies have thus reinvigorated the perspectives in education. They have emerged from the observation that in spite of the literacy practiced in various countries that has gradually lowered illiteracy rates and reached better results in the last decades, a great part of the literate shows characteristics of what is, then, identified as 'functional illiterate' (LUKE & FREEBODY 1997). These would be the literate whose reading ability is limited to literal comprehension of a text, representing a time in which literacy would mean the teaching of reading and writing, as it is also explained by Soares (2005, p 20): being literate would mean "the state or condition of one who reads and writes". This author thus adds that the technological society has greatly contributed to the change of meaning of 'reading' and 'access to reading'. If the literate was the one able to read a simple note or message or to write one's own name, nowadays it is the individual who is able to use reading and writing within a social practice. This observation comes from assessments done in various countries of several continents. The outcomes conclude that a great part of the investigated readers shows difficulties in the comprehension of a text and in the synthesis of its content. Even more difficulties are observed in the readers' capacity of inference, perception of ironies, interpretation of the between-the-lines message; besides, they lack their own critique of what they read and find it hard to relate the content of a text with the social context or reality in which they live. These perceptions become, then, some of the reasons for the renovated studies on this matter. Acknowledging that the social changes demand the inclusion of various abilities in how literacy works, various researchers have been developing studies in the new literacies area, aiming at enhancing visual literacy, digital literacy, multicultural literacy and critical literacy (CERVETTI, PARDALES & DAMICO 2001), among others.

In this new conception of literacy, Luke & Freebody (1997) state that within the understanding of

what reading means, the teaching of reading should accompany the teaching of cultural modes of seeing, describing, explaining. According to these authors, the readers should be required to understand textual representations, values, ideologies, discourses, take positioning, have views of the world, in addition to understanding that reading is related with knowledge and power distribution in a society. Within such educational parameters, it is expected that the interdisciplinarity in the areas of Literature and Languages, for instance, aims at reaching the objectives of reading as a social practice, as it is defended in these new studies.

Noticeably, thus, the proposal here focused shows pedagogical-philosophical concerns, as it turns to a critical perception of the societies in which we all live, to the development of people who interact in these societies having more capacity of choices and decision making. Therefore, I conclude that the focus of concern in Brazilian schools and universities that used to lead to classroom practices and issues should expand the angle of perspective, exercising the dialectic look as suggested by Saviani (1984). That should require the revision of the dissatisfactory picture mentioned in the beginning, an exercise that the new literacies and multiliteracies studies would contribute for reinterpreting the “leaves of the tree”.

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