Teach and learn with transmedia narrative. Analysis of experience in a high school in Argentina

Enseñar y aprender con narrativa transmedia. Análisis de experiencia en una escuela secundaria de Argentina

The article presents the experience of a transmedia narrative in a high school in Argentina with the aim of reflecting on the implications in the educational process. The analysis methodology is qualitative, based on participant observation and bibliographic review. The results link the transmedia narratives with the competences of the students, the role of the teacher and the dialogue with the community.

KEYWORDS: Education; Transmedia Narrative; Philosophy; Digital literacy.

El artículo presenta la experiencia de una narrativa transmedia en una escuela secundaria de Argentina con el objetivo de reflexionar sobre las implicaciones en el proceso educativo. La metodología de análisis es cualitativa, basada en observación participante y revisión bibliográfica. Los resultados vinculan las narrativas transmedia con las competencias de los estudiantes, el rol del docente y el diálogo con la comunidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación; narrativas transmedia; filosofía; alfabetización digital.

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TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Transmedia narratives are a type of narrative arising from the fictional which make possible the expansion of a story through different media and communication languages (be they analogical or digital), constituting a narrative world in which each fragment expands and provides more details about the narrated events (Jenkins, 2008; Scolari, 2013). The second fundamental characteristic of this type of narrative is that it cannot be thought without the possibility that users (or fans) are part of the story, sharing productions created by them which integrate to that narrative universe: on websites, blogs, YouTube videos, etc. This is often more an intention than a reality, and it is there where lies the challenge of producing a narrative script that expands through different media and obtain the “accomplice” production of those produsers (producers + users) who create new communicational pieces.

These characteristics of transmedia narratives can be thought of as a potential when teaching curricular content. That’s what the project *If Socrates lived ... Transmedia Narrative and Philosophy* was about, in which an experience of exploration and creation of productions in different formats and media was developed in order to address curricular contents of philosophy in the processes of teaching and learning. Next, we present a brief review of the technological context in which this project is inscribed.

We think about the use of transmedia narratives in the context of a series of structural changes in different areas: social, political, economic, legal, labour and of course, educational, that configure a new way of understanding and making culture.

According to the reflections of the philosopher Serres (2014), the ways in which we store, process, send and receive information have substantially modified the social, political, economic and educational processes. We are witnessing a cultural and cognitive revolution, which records three antecedents (or previous revolutions): orality, as the resource used to save the memory of the peoples; the invention of writing and the possibility of coding language, which allowed the organization
of cities and the rule of law; and the printing press, which gave rise to modern science, put religion in crisis and redefined democracy.

The fourth revolution is that of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which, by transforming the relationship between the support and the message, modifies the space (from the “Cartesian” space to the “non-space” of networks, whose rules are blurred), and time (from calendar and static organization, to flexible and dynamic time). For Serres (2014), in addition to the political implications of these changes there is a new way of knowing that transforms our ability to memorize, our imagination and the ways in which we reason and build knowledge, especially in the younger population:

These children, then, live in the virtual. Cognitive sciences show that the use of the Net, the reading or writing of messages with the thumbs, consultations on Wikipedia or Facebook, do not stimulate the same neurons nor the same cortical zones that the use of the book, the chalk or the notebook ... They no longer have the same head (p. 21).

These transformations present advantages and disadvantages. The technological possibility of accessing information at any time and place opposes the ability to discern what is valid and useful in the tangle of content of networks. The ability of the devices to process information and disseminate it widely resists the urgent need for “literacy” in the use of these programs that make possible the creation of audios, texts, videos and other productions. Faced with the freedom of accessing social networks and expressing opinions about the problems of the community, grows the shadow of Internet espionage, covert censorship and the limits of algorithms. Faced with the promises of the technological revolution grows the need to build digital citizenship; that is, putting the axis in people and not in the devices (Bacher, 2016).

The context in which the school aims to sustain the hegemony of knowledge is marked by the pulse of a “new society”, built from a technological rationality that fragments the information and makes it available in a ubiquitous way, challenging the knowledge and school authority; it transnationalizes the identities, putting in tension the knowledge of the culture in relation to the traditional / national
learned in the school and “fascinates” with the permanent production of new hardware and technological software, forcing the States to promote public policies of access to screens, behind the idea that more technology results in more learning (Martín-Barbero, 2003).

The school ethos characteristic of the school of modernity (Tobeña, 2011), organized around compartmentalized knowledge, the book as a fundamental support of cultural transmission, the organization of the teaching and learning process in a vertical and unidirectional way (from teacher to student) and the reproduction of the hegemonic culture, is challenged by the cultural changes of recent times. Some of these changes refer to the advancement of technology and the circulation of information. The Internet makes encyclopaedic knowledge available along with a body of knowledge traditionally considered heretical, which does not necessarily respond to what the school wishes to inculcate. On the other hand, it supposes young people who relate to information in a different way (fragmentation/simultaneity/speed). It is not only a change of support, but also a different way of reading and appropriating knowledge.

This tension between school, culture and technologies forces us to propose new strategies that do not annul conflict, but evidence it to establish a dialogue between what we consider necessary to teach and new ways of learning, related to skills and experiences of digital culture, typical of students. The intention of the transmedia project that we will discuss in the following pages contains these paradoxes that combine the rigid times of the school with the permanent use of networks by the students, and the classroom space as a site of knowledge with the spaces of the city where knowledge also circulates.

This shows the concern of working with technologies in the classroom, given that space and time are transformed in a context where the reorganization of knowledge and academic legitimacy is imposed by teachers, whose roles were defined by the school institution centuries ago. The educational institution, based on disciplinary knowledge, authority, standardized evaluation criteria and methodological rigidity, clashes with the logic of consumption of new technology: customizable, flexible, emotional and dynamic that collide school purposes and temporalities and poses a debate in terms of symbolic and cultural mutation of the school institution (Dussel & Quevedo, 2010).
In this scenario of reconfiguration of knowledge, it appears new training needs for digital culture, along with other strategies needed for teaching curricular contents, according to the “technological sensitivity” of young people (Martín-Barbero, 2003). It is for this motive that arises the proposal to work with the design and production of a transmedia narrative.

In relation to this idea, it seems important to recover two concepts that are transversal to analyse the experience of the project: “transmedia literacy” and “transmedia competences”. According to Scolari (2018), the first concept refers to “a series of skills, practices, priorities, sensitivities, learning strategies and ways of sharing that are developed and applied in the context of new participatory cultures” (p. 17). The second concept, which emerges from the first, designates the “series of skills related to the production, exchange and consumption of content in interactive digital media” (p. 19). According to the research project Transmedia Literacy, it is possible to organize the competences of the students in nine dimensions, which include 44 general competences and 190 specific ones. This classification is especially useful given that it shows that the competences in relation to the use of technologies by young people constitute a partial knowledge, which does not imply total mastery of the tools they use.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION STAGES OF THE TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE**

The educational project *If Socrates lived ... Transmedia Narrative and Philosophy* was carried out in the High School N° 10 “José Manuel Estrada”, located in Olavarría (Buenos Aires, Argentina). The school has an approximate enrolment of 1 000 students, who in the fourth, fifth and sixth year are grouped according to the following curricular orientations: social sciences, natural sciences and literature. The orientations suppose a curricular scheme with common subjects to which other specific subjects are added according to the area of study chosen by each student. In the same way, students work with specific projects and activities related to each orientation.
The development of transmedia production took place between June and November 2017. The experience followed the norms and central objectives of education in the country, which promote the development of the necessary competences for the handling of the new languages, produced by information and communication technologies. On the other hand, we were interested in recovering the knowledge that students possess in relation to technology and articulating it with the school knowledge itself.

The transmedia project was organized in five stages, which included different activities and in which it was intended to favor different cognitive processes. In Figure 1 we systematized this information.

As a starting point and within the framework of the Philosophy class, we selected the life and philosophical ideas of Socrates to develop the transmedia narrative. It offers several interesting edges for philosophical reflection and, above all, the possibility of recreating his thought, thus attending to one of the main features of transmedia narratives, the expansion; that is, the possibility of creating something new from the given.

To do this, we developed the theoretical framework around the figure of Socrates and its validity in the context of the discussion of the just and the legal in contemporary society, focusing on the ideas of trial and death sentence. We proposed a dialogue between Criton and The Apology, with the intention of problematizing to what extent the

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4 ICT training is covered by the National Education Law No. 26.206 (Article No. 11) and the Buenos Aires Province Educational Law No. 13.688 (Article No. 28).

5 Criton and the Apology are two Platonic dialogues. In the first, Criton proposes Socrates to escape from prison and he refuses with the argument that the laws challenge him. In the Apology the defense of Socrates appeals to the philosophical mission that has been assigned by Delphi in order to argument his innocence before the court that accuses him.
The notion of justice presented by Socrates is in force, proposing questions about fairness and laws, as well as Socrates’ presumption that death, rather than being a punishment, could be a benefit. This last topic, although it had not been one of the ideas to be initially discussed in our project, turned out to be one of the most discussed topics in the students’ productions. Particularly because this controversy in the history of Socrates divided the student positions and the media productions that were consequently elaborated: for some groups the decision of Socrates to comply with the sentence and to refuse to escape was just because the laws were respected and, for others groups, the fact that Socrates did not leave Athens was a selfish decision, especially since his children would be orphaned.
In a second moment, the students had to recover the discussions raised from the philosophical readings to think about current problems. This involved searching for information, socializing the ideas and arguing the assumed positions. The selected topics covered questions about justice, citizenship and other issues of social and political interest.

In the third stage of work, in the area of Language and Literature, the students dealt with the construction of narrative scripts, to later plan the transmedia production, especially recapturing the importance of expanding the story and, in addition, generating interaction with the users. Attending to these aspects, it was requested that the production of the scripts contemplate the following points: the aspects/ideas of Socrates that they wanted to recover in the narrative, the characters and the possible scenarios, the means and digital tools that they would use to tell the story, and the modalities of interaction with the public. It was the students who decided what they wanted to tell, argued their decisions according to what they learned, and selected the digital resources they knew and mastered to make the narrative fragment. This stage of script production involved several moments of revision and socialization, prioritizing the construction of the narrative and the choice of the digital tool. As an example: one of the productions sought to reconstruct the discussion between Socrates and Criton in current conditions and for this, they first thought of a television program. At the time of writing the narrative and technical script, the group realized the complexity of working with that format. These reformulation processes were very valuable because they made it possible to think each piece in relation to the global script of the transmedia narrative and to the possibilities of realization within the foreseen terms. The proposal was for students to create their own educational content: that they could recover aspects of Socrates’ life and ideas to problematize the current reality that calls them as citizens and to establish a dialogue with the community beyond the classroom based on new questions.

In the fourth stage of the experience, each group had to elaborate the communication pieces of the transmedia narrative. For this, they had to manipulate interactive digital media and put into play skills and abilities that did not constitute teaching content during the development of the experience. Although two specific workshops on image, sound
and video editing software were completed, a large part of the students’ productions were the result of the “informal learning strategies” (Scolari, 2018) that were recovered at the school to carry out the project. Although not all students knew or had interest or competences to produce content in digital media, the teaching team let them to make the decision about which media to work on. According to their knowledge, they chose to make videogames, websites, animations, graphic campaigns, profiles in social networks, among others. This allowed us to link the daily practices of the students outside the school with the curricular objectives of the educational project. In order to elaborate his communication pieces within the framework of the transmedia narrative, it was necessary to recover the ideas of Socrates, to think about a current problem and to sustain a hypothesis of interaction with the community; that is, a hypothesis that would allow expanding the classroom and of course, the narrative created.

Once the productions were finished, in the fifth stage of the experience, a schedule of publication and dissemination of the project was coordinated with the students with the participation of the public. For this last stage, a website was made in which the final productions are available, which include the life of Socrates in Videoscribe, Skype between Socrates and Criton, the 2019 political campaign of Socrates for the intendancy, Socrates YouTuber, Socrates on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the videogame “El preguntado” by Socrates.

TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVES. RESULTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE EXPERIENCE

We proposed participant observation and literature review as data collection and production techniques in order to analyze the experience previously presented. For the purpose of defining what to observe and how to systematize it, we adopted what Rodríguez Gómez (cited in Álvares-Gayou Jurgenson, 2003) defines as a “categorical observation system”, referring to the process of “observing certain pre-established

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phenomena by means of the same research questions” (p. 105). In consequence, we collected information on the exchanges, debates and practices that took place in each class, workshop and production space of the transmedia narrative, based on three categories of experience analysis: “role of the teacher”, “link between the transmedia competences and school knowledge” and “dialogue between school and community”. Regarding the first category, we were interested in thinking about what Scolari (2018) proposes:

In transmedia literacy, the teacher is a knowledge facilitator, an actor that involves students in a participatory learning process. In this context, the teacher is a flexible and decentralized actor that promotes bottom-up learning (p. 17).

The second category allowed us to focus on the meeting point between students’ competences and those curricular contents that the
school had to teach in the educational project; that is, how the transmedia narrative favored the learning of the ideas of Socrates. At this point, it is important to recover the reflection of Dussel (2018) that the school “is not a homogeneous and unified institution, but a provisional assembly of practices, artefacts, people, knowledge, which is not defined only by walls or forms of state regulation but by complex interactions in various directions” (p. 107).

In the interstices of the practices and the meanings unfurled by different actors in the institution, our third category allowed us to systematize ideas about the dialogue established by the school with the community based on the implementation of an educational project not circumscribed to the logic, times and school spaces. In this way, we question ourselves about what happens with the experience of teachers, students, managers, parents and the community in general when “creative engines” are set in motion. Maggio (2018) points out that:

Opposite to the persistent predominance of curricular versions of the collection type of topics that in practice still imply a race against time to cover what is basically an extensive and fragmented list, we propose to work regularly on curricular interpretations generating temporary and significant collective consensus on the readings that will be carried out in each time and place, in a deep recognition of the context and current themes from social, cultural and academic perspectives (p. 64).

In other words, with the development of the transmedia narrative we assume the challenge of bringing to the community the value of the school closer and establishing points of dialogue with its own interests, concerns and knowledge to provide feedback to the pedagogical proposal.

Regarding the first category of analysis, the role of the teacher in the configuration of the transmedia narrative, our experience allowed us to question those perspectives that consider him or her as a mere applicator of study programs or strategies. We can refer to teachers as reflective practitioners (Schön & Coll, 1998). This means, in the first place, that the teacher learns from his or her own practice and secondly and from a critical point of view, that is capable of projecting his or
her actions towards the social scenario as a transformative intellectual (Giroux, 1997), that is, as a critical actor that puts into discussion the legitimization of school knowledge and the role of the school in the transmission of a hegemonic culture. Both perspectives try to overcome the separation between the production of theory, the decisions about the curriculum and the teaching practice in the classroom. On the other hand, if we take into account that the transmedia narrative, in addition to taking advantage of the skills that students learn outside the school, aims to generate instances of content creation, decisions are not limited to the digital medium that best fits the script narrative, but also to what is intended to tell with the script itself. As an example, during the project *If Socrates lived ... Transmedia Narrative and Philosophy*, the students recovered highly debated situations in society, such as the Maldonado affair. This opened the discussion on the possibility of the school to expand the debate in social networks, the way Philosophy would problematize it, if it would imply a take of position or a proposal of questions, the way community would react, etc.

Regarding the second category, the transmedia competences and the school knowledge, during the course of the project the students made different communication pieces that we could group in: creation of a website, animations and videos; management of social networks; elaboration of graphics pieces; redesign of a video game. In each case, according to the classification proposed by the *Transmedia Literacy* project, different transmedia competences were recovered:

- Creation of a website: production competences were recovered to encode software, particularly through the use of Wordpress.
- Animations and videos: competences were recovered to create and modify written productions, use software and writing applications, record audio and employ editing tools, create and modify audio-visual productions, and use tools to shoot and edit.

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7 National conjunctural issues crossed the publications in the period between July and October 2017. Examples of this were the allusions to the forced disappearance of Santiago Maldonado by state forces during a mobilization supporting the Mapuche people’s demands.
• Management of social network profiles: competences were recovered mainly to manage content files, participate in social networks, evaluate and reflect on stereotypes and ideological connotations of the content; like, follow, comment, tag, share and chat; recognize and describe the technical characteristics of social networks; learn and experiment with the social skills following the rules of the netiquette.

• Elaboration of graphic pieces: competences to create and modify photographic productions and use photographic and editing tools.

• Creation of a videogame: in this case it was necessary to recover competences to recognize and describe the software, the hardware and features of the game, and use tools for its creation and modification, in particular Scratch.

• Other general competences: evaluate and reflect on stereotypes and ideological connotations of the contents; understand the story, the narration, etc.; reconstruct transmedia narrative worlds; recognize and describe genres in different media and platforms; recognize and describe the characteristics of the different formats and know how to name them; recognize and describe the characteristics of different narrative worlds; take into account aesthetic and narrative values when creating content; create collaboratively; help others to create collaboratively; coordinate and lead a group of people when creating content; teach how to create content; teach how to use technology (hardware, software, applications, etc.).

Finally, regarding the category “dialogue of the school institution with the community”, it is possible to appreciate the learning in collaborative terms, given that the knowledge was built altogether with the teacher, the peers and the students. The educator acted as mediator. Therefore, one of the characteristics of the project must be highlighted: the need to work with others; that is, the creation of interdisciplinary teams, in which both the actors of the institution and others external to it converged.

For the particular case of the Philosophy curricular space, the project allowed the construction of knowledge based on a work modality that made it possible for the students to appropriate philosophical
problems and reformulate them based on their experiences and their cultural context. This was reflected in the formulation of original problematizations and in Facebook publications that covered current issues related to justice and law where the philosophical ideas were resignify.

Two of the central characteristics of the transmedia narratives in which we wanted to emphasize during the project had to do with the expansion of the story and the interaction with the users. In the first case, we believe that the objective was achieved, since it was possible to think and place Socrates in other possible scenarios. In the case of the interaction with the public, we consider that it is an important axis to work on if we want to open the borders of the school and promote the exchange with the community or, in other words, if we want the school to interpellate the community with an educational proposal. This was one of the points that we should strengthen in future transmedia projects, given that the participation of the public consisted in comments on social networks and not in the creation of parallel pieces that would allow us to expand the story. In any case, even when the audience is limited to “listening”, “reading” or “seeing”, their reception of these productions is different because they are aware that they can participate actively if they wish (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2015). However, it is necessary to emphasize that the mere fact of enabling a communication channel or proposing a transmedia narration is not a guarantee of the user-to-produser passage. For this reason, we should think about some hypothesis of why our transmedia narrative did not manage to “move” enough to the citizens: scarce knowledge of the proposal, disinterest in the topic, lack of conceptual or technical skills to elaborate a content and disseminate it, fear or embarrassment of exposing positioning regarding social and political issues. Despite this, we agree with Jenkins (2015), who asserts what follows:

People who insist that the creation of DIY content (do-it-yourself) is the fundamental element of participatory culture, risks undermining other types of participation: evaluation, appraisal, criticism and redistribution of material (p. 170).
In this sense, the proposal demands to be improved, but not discarded, since it was possible to transcend the school’s frontier and favor different cognitive processes that allow us to talk about a significant learning around various aspects: collaborative work, reflection capacity on current problems, development of original communication products, resignification of contents based on the interests of students.

In the next section we will present some final considerations with the aim of outlining possible lines of work when thinking transmedia narrative in the teaching-learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience that we have recovered here allows us to reflect on the following questions: what should we take into account when planning a teaching and learning process that includes transmedia narratives? What role do teachers, students, and the community occupy?

According to Scolari (2014), it is possible to talk about a transmedia narrative (TN) when the media industry (MI) and the participative cultures of the users (PCU) are put into dialogue. A formula that could be presented as MI + PCU = TN. However, is it possible to think of a formula for the educational field?

An important point is that neither transmedia narratives nor information and communication technologies (ICTs) guarantee the construction of knowledge by themselves. In fact, they don’t guarantee certain processes of reflection, problematization and active production by the students and the community they seek to interpellate. For this reason and in accordance with the contributions of Coll (2008), we emphasize the importance of planning activities and slogans in agreement with previously defined objectives that place the learning of curricular contents in the centre.

The challenge is to propose activities that recover the transmedia competences of students to tell stories in digital media (their own daily trajectories that they share in social networks: videos on YouTube, photographs on Instagram, etc.). In our project, this consisted of “giving life” to Socrates through a transmedia narrative based on the recognition of the central ideas of this thinker, capable of questioning citizens.
So, if we had to think about the formula that resulted in the transmedia narrative, we could say that first we defined the educational purposes (EP), which contributed to the elaboration of the transmedia script by external specialists, teachers and students in the curricular spaces of Philosophy and Language and Literature. Then, contents generated by the students (CGE) emerged and finally, the productions were disseminated with the aim of favouring the participatory culture of citizens (CPC). Attending these processes, it might be more accurate to speak of Pedagogical Transmedia Narrative (NTP) to distinguish it from other types of narratives that set out different purposes. In summary, the formula would be like this:

\[ \text{EP} + \text{CGE} + \text{PCC} = \text{PTN} \]

One of the crucial points was to define the pedagogical positioning that gave sustenance to the foundation of the project. We thought it important to make clear what we understand by the inclusion of digital technology in the classroom, so as not to fall into technocentric postulates that attribute to technological innovation (in this case the production of digital communication pieces) the responsibility of teaching, what closes the possibility of a central debate: whether or not there are apprenticeships before, during and after the inclusion of technologies.

For Dussel and Quevedo (2010) the potential of ICT is related to favouring practices of intervention, rewriting, modification and resignification of existing goods and technologies. It is an opportunity for the school to educate in new forms of cultural appropriation that promote critical, collaborative and creative values. That is, it is not about using the screens as an end in itself but “to produce and understand, with critical perspectives, the novel environments in which the school without walls is inserted, the extensive and world school of which we are part of” (Bacher, 2016, p. 21).

Proposing the creation of a pedagogical transmedia narrative allowed us to link the community with the curricular contents learned in the curricular space of Philosophy, recovering knowledge of the areas of Language and Literature (in script writing) and ICT (in production of
digital content). On the other hand, ICT (that also promote values and diverse points of view and invite to reflection (Bacher, 2016)) became a content to be taught when some group of students lacked the basic knowledge both for the use of digital production tools and for the use of technologies that promote not only transmedia literacy (Scolari, 2018), but also the construction of digital citizenship.

As a summary of this section, and after the foregoing, we would like to add two reasons that seem important to us when answering the question of why include transmedia narratives in education. The first reason has to do with the breaking of the traditional space of the classroom. That is to say, the frontier of the classroom is transcended, as a physical space, because students works in different places of the institution: a chemistry laboratory is transformed into a film set, a computer cabinet into a newsroom, the assembly hall into a microcinema where productions are shared; but, in addition, the classroom frontier is transcended when these productions take place in the home (the “inverted classroom” strategy) and are shared at the classroom to revise, expand or modify them. The production of transmedia narratives, in addition, invites to the rupture of the influence space of the school as an institution, given that the productions that are thought of in the classroom reach the community through different media (analogical and digital) with the intention of occupy other external spaces.

A second reason to think about the incorporation of this type of narrative in education has to do with the breaking of traditional school times: rigid stipulated time schedule is made flexible, since the predefined days and times not always coincide with the urgencies of transmedia production. In addition, the curricular times established by the school calendar that indicate that the period of activity ends at some point get blurry. This opens the way for thinking of a story that continues and can be expanded, revised and resignify not only by students but also by other teachers, specialists and citizens. The story with its educational contents and interaction devices already created, transcends the temporal and spatial limits of the school, which means a huge challenge that demands continuity, monitoring and participation.

Finally, the incorporation of transmedia narratives involves thinking about a type of knowledge organization that challenges the disciplinary
structure of school knowledge. In the same sense, the active role of students both in the resignification and production of content and in the use of digital tools should be thought of as a role that propitiates spaces and times different from those from classroom, and that promotes the opening of the school borders to enter into dialogue with the community.

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