

# Sets, Actors and Acts of learning in Social Networks

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose that making use of social networks is to assume a verbal-axiological position in the field of the discourses, which are historically, socially and culturally founded in social and language relations. This has deep implications in the process of learning in a Network Society being established by digital natives and immigrants, which interact and share their points of view, knowledge and experiences in cyberspace.

## RESUMO

Neste trabalho, propomos que fazer uso de redes sociais é assumir uma posição verbo-axiológica no campo dos discursos, que são historicamente, socialmente e culturalmente fundados nas relações sociais e de linguagem. Isto tem implicações profundas no processo de aprendizagem na Sociedade em Rede que tem sido engendrada por nativos e imigrantes digitais, que interagem e compartilham seus pontos de vista, conhecimentos e experiências no ciberespaço.

## Keywords

Social Networks. Discourse. Discourse Genres. Authorship. Learning Culture.

## 1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The contemporary world is constituted on the basis of a social organization supported by the information, in which communication networks and electronic information structure the social morphology, composing what Castells [1] calls a Network Society. Such context requires the operation of conceptual, methodological and paradigmatic changes in the educational process, the relationship of teaching and learning that takes place in formal education, the relations between the actors, as well as the acceptance of the premise that knowledge production is not limited to the school, and that the processes of teaching and learning should be understood as social and cognitive actions.

Arranged in a scenario of accelerated technological advances, new forms of relationships emerge between subjects and new forms of knowledge production are established, which justifies the need for studies that intend to reflect on the process of teaching and learning in this space of knowledge production and interaction between individuals that is the virtual world. Sharing this vision, in this paper we aim at reflecting about the process of knowledge production in the context of the new culture of learning and pedagogical use of the social network Facebook, highlighting the need for teacher preparation to work in areas of teaching and learning arising from the scenario of digital connections established between digital natives and immigrants, and the ways of teaching and learning within the new culture of learning.

We claim that the immersion in the social network's world is a discursive one, which operates in the field of linguistic usage. So, an important notion from which to consider learning in social networks is the idea of discourse production.

Taking this notion as crucial to understand the new culture of learning taking place through social networks, we describe the set where the discourse production as learning activity happens, conceived as an emerging field of human activity: the software of social networking Facebook. Next, we discuss the language subjects that produce speech and act in this set, the digital natives and immigrants, specifying their similarities and differences and describing their role as discourse producers in the creation of the discourse, conceived, according to Bakhtin [2] as an aesthetic object, the text or discourse. Then, we claim that the new culture of learning through social networking is a text based one, taking the notion of text as language activity, as a linguistic-discursive act. At last, we present our final propositions.

The interactions among discursive subjects have (re)configured themselves with the arrival of the internet and the rapid development and dissemination of information and communication technologies, which established new settings of interfacing, communication and organization of social practices. In this context, we highlight the digital social networks, environments created for the promotion of internet-mediated social relations, which have become a learning space converging to the construction of a new educational model.

It is imperative to emphasize that the digital social networks are part of everyday life for both students and teachers, and although they have not been developed for educational purposes, they have currently been employed also in this perspective. This possibility, of new educational room, brings the challenge to educators to understand how learning may occur through the developing of social relationships in cyberspace. This (re)configuration applies itself to the teaching format, helping to break old educational paradigms, in which the classroom was the unique place for learning and the teacher, the center of knowledge.

The digital social networks represent a new trend of sharing contacts, information and knowledge, according to Pettenati et al. [3] and Brandtzaeg et al. [4]. They are applications that admit a common space for interests, needs, goals, for collaboration, knowledge sharing, interaction and communication. In the field of teaching, they make possible several opportunities for the creation of a cooperative and collaborative learning environment.

Facebook, scenario of discussion in this article, and the set where the discourse production as learning activity takes place, is according to Recuero [5], a social networking site itself, i. e., a software system in which there are profiles and specific spaces for publicizing the connections between subjects, whose primary focus lies on the public display of networks connected to the

actors. For the author, the social networking softwares are just systems, not the real social networks, they just act as a support for the interactions among social (or discursive) subjects, the actual constituents of the network. In this context, digital social networks are discursive spaces created for the promotion of social ties mediated by the internet, where the subjects are in constant interaction, without limitations of space and time, in a relentless exchange of information and connections to the world.

What very few people remember about Facebook is that it was released in a learning environment with informal academic purposes: to enable college freshmen, students recently admitted in Harvard University, to get to know each other and create a contact network among them. In Facebook, besides their own and other subjects' profiles, users may access different services for distinguished purposes, like News Feeds, Facebook Notes, Messaging, Voice and Video Calls, and the features of following other users, arranging their own privacy settings and making use of the "like button", with its iconic thumbs up hand, for stressing their appreciation of someone else's discourse production inside the network.

However, virtual social networks, as contemporary social features, require a cautious look about their possibilities for educational purposes and should be the focus of study so that we can reflect on their limits and possibilities. Some negative aspects also emerge, according to Griffith & Liyanage [6], among them are: the possible use of information and data posted by the user, extracted with illicit purposes, the amount and type of advertising that may affect the quality of learning, and the digital bullying, in which the individual is systematically exposed to a number of aggressive actions, directly or indirectly, occurring without apparent motivation, but still purposefully [7].

As a social networking software, the social and discursive use of Facebook [8] can be considered as a field of human activity. According to Bakhtin [9], every field of human activity is linked to the use of language, which is related to empirical life. This relation between life and language, which happens through the discourse, constitutes relatively stable types of utterances used in certain fields of human activity. These types, Bakhtin [9] called speech genres. They show extreme heterogeneity, equivalent to the heterogeneity of human activity. Bakhtin [9] divides them into primary genres, which are the discursive interactions of everyday life and secondary genres, which are characterized as complex discursive productions, usually more extensive and formal.

For Bakhtin [2] [9], there is a reciprocal relationship between language and ideology, the field of ideas, and by the evaluative and ideological discourse positioning of the subjects, the language becomes part of life through concrete utterances. The speech producer, or actor, always acts linguistically upon the assumption of a responsive position of its audience, so that all understanding is pregnant with response, and the interaction is given by the alternation of discursive subjects in the communicative chain.

The utterance gets exhausted, there is a project of discourse, a discursive intentionality of the speaker and the compositional forms typical of the genre. Therefore, we assimilate forms of language only as utterances, so that learning language means learning to build utterances. Every utterance is a link in the discursive chain. It is the active position of the speaker in this or that field of the object and the meaning. Each utterance is filled with echoes and resonances of other utterances to which it is connected by the identity of the communication discourse sphere. The choice of linguistic resources is made by the speaker, or

discursive subject, under greater or lesser influence of the recipient and his early, anticipated, response.

As a field of human activity, human interaction through digital social softwares like Facebook are enabling the emergence of a new discourse genre: the digital social networking, which has features that relate themselves to the discursive activity of communicating and learning in the cyberspace.

Vraking and Venn [10], consider that teaching has become something challenging, since students have considerably changed their way of building their learning and their modes of social behavior. In this context, the digital social network genre, which is part of everyday life for students and teachers, emerges as a field of language activity where teachers and students develop actions in partnership through cooperation and interaction with the context, the environment and the culture, confirming there is room for the coexistence of different forms of learning [11].

However, the educational practice that develops in the virtual environment, while establishing a space for interaction between individuals and knowledge building, also expresses differences in the subjects' use of technology. To Prensky [12], there is a mismatch between the current educational system, being the teachers digital immigrants, and the needs and interests of students, which are digital natives. According to this author, the students, "native speakers" of the digital language, represent a generation that grew up in a world of great interaction with digital technology, which processes information and knowledge differently. Digital natives naturally dominate the language of digital and technological world, communicate and interact with ease in this environment making use of tools and computational resources. They understand the world in their own manner and learned to build knowledge differently from the "old" generation. To Prensky [12], the information and knowledge society is the boundary that separates digital natives from digital immigrants, people who have had to adapt to the reality of communication in the digital age and get used to a scenario of numerous technological innovations.

We do not intend here to make use of the classification proposed by Prensky [12] to establish a divide between generations, either use this concept as a delimiter of skills and competencies of individuals in the use of technological resources, but with the goal of differentiating those who were born in this digital set and interact with technology in a natural and spontaneous way from those who grew up during its establishment and often need greater effort to use them. This generation gap, however difficulties it might offer, may be considered an opportunity to promote greater equality between the roles of teacher and learner, as this position may be fluidly occupied by teachers and learners alternately, while they deal with technology through the discourse production.

As a discursive field, it is necessary to claim that there is a distinction between teachers and students as authors-persons and as author-creators of speech in this language world. The first is the writer, the person, the individual. The second function is aesthetic-formal, which allows the utterance and the text, a constituent of the aesthetic object, an element of immanent artistic whole. It is, more precisely, the constituent shaping the aesthetic object or the text, the pivot that supports the architectural unity of the whole compositional and aesthetically finished [13].

The author-creator is basically understood as a formal-aesthetic position whose central feature is to materialize a certain axiological relationship with the hero and his world. It is through

the writer-creator that the social, historical and cultural elements become intrinsic to the aesthetic object, i. e. the utterance. To give material form to the whole discourse, the author-creator conquers the language, making use of it through their axiological meanings as set out in concrete [13].

In a social network, the author-creator writes his profile, an autobiography. The autobiography, according to Faraco [13], as a direct speech is not merely about the writer himself pronounced inside the event of an experienced life. When writing his autobiography, the writer needs to move, stand outside the boundaries of merely living, becoming somebody else in relation to himself, that is, he needs to look with a certain surplus of insight and knowledge. Only then he can give a relatively finishing to what is narrated.

In the traditional view of teaching, information is transferred from the teacher to the student, it presupposes a knowledge produced by mankind that is immutable and imperative. Thomas and Brown [14] propose that it is the digital information network that establishes the context in which learning takes place in the new culture of learning. In this perspective, the school is seen as a learning environment, but not the only one. The setting of the classroom, privileged space when we think of learning, is replaced by the virtual space [14].

Two elements make up the new culture of learning: a network of digital information, which allows access to a large amount of information, and a structured environment that gives space to build, and take axiological positions about the experience through language. The approach in the new culture focuses on learning through the engagement in the world, the exchanges between peers, based on the active involvement and sharing, and the collective production of knowledge.

Thomas and Brown [14] argue that learning should be assumed as a culture environment, constituting the community in a collaborative manner, resulting in a new culture in which knowledge is fluid and is constantly evolving. For the authors, it is critical for us to move from the old teaching model to this new culture of learning that comes from an environment filled with almost infinite resources able to broaden people's curiosity and interest in learning, in which learning stops being only a process of isolated assimilation to become an organic process, social, collective, emphatically discursive.

The social, the historical, the cultural are immanent to verbal language, characterized by utterances and speech genres, its creative character. This immanence is conceived through the fundamental constructive principle of discursive activity, the relationship of the author-creator with what he states. The language is designed as heteroglossia, a set of multiple and heterogeneous networks of axiological and cultural relations expressed in language activity, a relational reality that is realized in text, using a dynamic of multiple responsive interrelationships.

In every act of speech production, a position against other evaluative positions takes up, so that the axiological element is a nuclear constitutor of Bakhtin's thought about all linguistic manifestation [15]. The semanticity of the utterance always involves concrete and so interconnected values and meaning.

The speech genres are also axiologically loaded, and so are the discursive relations of interaction and learning that occur in social networks like Facebook, featuring a participatory range of responsive guidance within culture.

The contemporary scene is established as a stage of intense changes arising mainly from technological advances. This dynamic movement of transformations has more impact on different spheres of social organization and in particular in the area of education which shows that the traditional teaching models have become unable to meet the needs for knowledge production in the Network Society [1].

It is a fact that traditional teaching approaches reveal themselves increasingly obsolete and, as educators, we face the challenge to keep pace with rapid technological change, and the possibilities offered by its resources.

The social network Facebook, with its potential to be used as a virtual non-formal learning mean, a setting for intense and creative discursive productions, appears as an innovative space that expands the socialization and educational practices contributing to a collaborative learning network, through dialogue and collective construction of knowledge, bringing natives and digital immigrants. Its use as a pedagogical tool meets the need to revitalize the teaching space, and the proposed new learning culture focused on learning through engagement in the world, the interaction between natives and digital immigrants in trade between peers, in active involvement and sharing, and collective production of knowledge.

In this context, the role of the student modifies, requiring that he is an active agent and collaborator of the process of knowledge production, with the teacher as a co-participant agent. According to Santos and Radike [11], the students cease to be the receivers of information and become those responsible for building their knowledge. In this setting, social networks can contribute to the mobilization of knowledge so that teachers and students develop language actions in partnership, through cooperation and interaction with the context, with the environment and the culture [11].

The school can make use of social networks considering that this may contribute to the further development of themes discussed in class, as well as establishing itself as a learning and interaction enhancer among educators and students, confirming that there is room for the coexistence of different forms of teaching and learning.

In addition to the changes proposed for the initial and continuing teacher's training, which prepares the educator to work in new areas of teaching and learning, it is necessary that they understand that the students, digital natives, in their daily lives have access to a large amount of information and the latest technological features, which influences their way of studying, learning and interacting with their peers and the world, also in the discursive sphere.

As the result of a constructive learning process, the interactive nature of social and cultural knowledge and learning, migrating from individual processes to social processes, according to Coll et al. [16], a reflection on the educational use of social networking sites is justified because understanding them is essential to understand the modes of knowledge, learning and discourse production/construction, as well as the appropriation of the internet as a tool of organization and composition of social group, communication and contemporary information [5].

However, despite the educational potential of social networks, some care is necessary in order to incorporate their benefits, such as a pedagogical strategy and structure and well defined objectives. We, as educators, should be aware that new models of

knowledge production will be established by future generations, whether we choose to integrate in the new culture of learning that drives the search for new spaces for teaching and learning and new ways of teaching and learning.

Perhaps Bakhtin has come to the belief that even the agora, in our context, a digital agora, can never be perfect, at least we can ensure that it is the space of dialogic contrast, that the recognition of heteroglossia, also in learning experiences, allows us to always resist the totalitarian and the dogmatic [13], so that ethics based on otherness can be the foundation for our educational actions [13].

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