

Distance education in Brazil

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In this issue, he takes a break from the News&Reviews pages to bring Food for Thought and Discussion from Brazil. This exchange programme falls within the framework of newMetropolis' international activities.

In October I was invited by CNPq, the Brazilian Research Council, to visit numerous schools and institutions in Brazil, and to give my advice about the Distance Learning projects that are being developed in the country.

The Brazilian government is now undertaking some major projects to improve the situation of public education. One of these is to 'spread' 100,000 computers that can be connected to the Internet to 7,500 public schools in the country. This means that every school will be able to participate in programs and activities based on the Internet and in general on electronic communication.

It is in my opinion a very brave and courageous act by the government to invest so much in communication and computers for schools. Such an investment in technology, which raised many protests and concerns as well (in a country where analphabetism reaches two-digit percentage figures, the drop-out rate at elementary school level is 80%, and where for many children the main reason for going to school is having a meal during the day), is actually the first step towards looking ahead to the future of education, and giving the schools a new role.

The example of Brazil is unique in many ways. Certainly it is not by giving computers to schools that the serious social problems of the country will be solved. But it poses interesting questions as far as the role of schools in the community is concerned.

Community schools

Much of Brazilian life is still based on rural activities – and the school situation reflects this. The big cities have private schools, to all extents similar to the schools (public and private) we have in Europe. The majority of public schools are thus in the outskirts of the cities, or in rural communities. The social structure in these areas is deeply troubled – and the effects on the kids are well know to everybody: drug abuse, prostitution, abandoned children and criminality are enormous problems.

Often the community in the rural areas of Brazil has a connotation of a 'closed' environment, where many stereotypes still exist about social roles, family, importance of schools etc. For example, in more than one school I visited, the students were surprised to see a young man talking to them in the classroom, where the only 'teacher' figure they have is always a woman.

Trying to address directly or indirectly the social problems is a hard task for the teachers. Too often the school, as an institution, does not have the 'authority' to tackle such problematic issues. For many parents, school is the place where their children go to learn to read and write, not where they are confronted with the question of whether the family and the environment they live in is good. If schools do more than combat illiteracy, the kids would be better off working - or making money anyhow - feel many parents.

Beyond the basic curriculum, schools must thus work carefully on other issues in their community, such as health and pollution. There are countless examples in Brazil of schools which are located in extremely polluted areas, many of them the result of senseless land speculation. Rivers which are literally black, and entire fields covered with all sorts of junk, are common landscapes. The students create different research projects, many of which are also presented to the local community during special evenings or local holidays. The same for health problems, including prevention and awareness.

Still, the main limitation is that it is impossible to go beyond the borders of the community. All the cases, all the problems are confined to the community. The school's range of action cannot extend beyond these physical limits (some exceptions include field trips to check and sample the level of pollution in different areas, for example), literally but also from a 'conceptual' point of view, and the students are not aware of their role in the community, and of the community in the larger social environment.

A closed environment

Two main problems arise from this approach. The first concerns the global scale of issues like environment and health. These become relevant only if they are placed in a global perspective, understanding the relations between the different sub-systems, and thus understanding what is everybody's position and responsibility. Many times I was confronted in Brazil with a total lack of awareness of the repercussions of individual actions.

The second problem is that many of these children build an image of society based on their local situation, without any other example for comparison (even television is not very common in some areas). It means that they have a very 'static' and closed representation of the social structure and, most of all, no reason or ways of changing their often desperate existence.

School is - for many of them - the most stable and reliable place they know, and so it plays an enormously important role as far as social issues are concerned. For many of those children it will be difficult anyhow to leave their community, or to undertake any big change.

But still, a lot can be done to reduce drastically the negative aspects of their lives. The possibility of cooperation, to establish a joint plan of action with other students going beyond the borders of the school/community, provides a new model not only for educational activities, but in general for structuring the students' social behaviour.

I had the opportunity to talk and play with a lot of children, discover their interests and share many moments of their schooltime. More than the natural sense of

curiosity that is characteristic of all children, it was remarkable to see the firm desire (shared by the teachers as well) to compare themselves with other schools, to learn from different situations, to be assured that what they are doing is not a pedagogic exercise, but a real step to make their lives better be it through a cleaner environment or a better health.

Setting up the network

What I find of particular significance to the Brazilian projects is the strong influence on social skills that working on a network can exert. My experience with telematics projects in Italy over the past years showed that sharing resources on the Internet not only increases the research potential of the project, but gives the students a unique opportunity to experience for themselves the challenges of cooperation, responsibility, and accepting differences. All skills that are fundamental for building Brazilian society today and tomorrow.

The main question still unanswered is how effective the school projects will be. Effectiveness will depend largely on how they are structured, on the interactions that are generated between the schools involved, and on the projects' emphasis on cooperation rather than action.

It is definitely easier to use a computer as a support tool to lessons, with off-the-shelf software or specific education programs, but this does not contribute much to the skills I mentioned before. It is easier, though, because it requires less participation from the teachers, and apparently the students are more in control of their learning pace (especially with hypermedia software).

Managing a cooperative project demands planning, constant monitoring, advice, and a great input of human resources. And a willingness to invest heavily in the young generation.

Brazil, it seems, is ready to accept the challenge.

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