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Challenges for teaching history in the Digital Age: a case study on digital educational objects in Brazilian didactic textbooks

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This research analyzes a pioneering public policy of the Ministry of Education (MEC) aimed at introducing digital supports in the area of History in Brazilian public schools. In 2012, through public selection, controlled by the National Program of Didactic Textbooks (PNLD), created in Brazil more than three decades ago and one of the largest initiatives in the world concerning the acquisition of books and didactic materials, publishers from all over the country were invited to produce multimedia content that, if approved, should be incorporated into the collections of textbooks used by students and teachers of public schools from 2014 on.

To analyze this MEC initiative, a central problem involves the conception and uses that teachers and students make of the so-called "new information technologies" (LÉVY, 1999, CASTELLS, 2003, MAYNARD, 2011). We are faced with a phenomenon that is constantly changing, a universe in which the conception of time seems more accelerated. And these changes, precisely because of their astonishing aspect, have awakened opposed passions between "neo-Luddites" or " techno-skeptics" and " cyber-enthusiasts" (COHEN, 2006; MAYNARD, 2011).

The existence of the conflict of perspectives described above points to the conclusion that it is important to deepen the debate about making history in the digital age. (NEGROPONTE, 1995; SMITH, 2008; CHARTIER, 2009). It is even stronger because our students are mostly born digital today, that is, we are talking about boys and girls born in continuous contact with the digital world (PRENSKY, 2012). Now let us add to this the fact that Brazil experienced a boom in computers and Internet access in the 2000s. In the so-called "inclusive decade" Brazilians' access to consumer goods such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, DVD players and CD expanded significantly. Reflections of this advance appear in the data of 2014, which indicate that 83% of navigators between 10 and 15 years old use the internet for educational purposes.

Considered one of the most important Brazilian governmental public policies in the educational sector, the PNLD is developed by the Ministry of Education and aims to guarantee the access to didactic textbooks of recognized quality to the students of public schools in the country. The distribution of the books by PNLD is universal and free of charge.

As prescribed in the public notice of the PNLD 2014, multimedia content was analyzed, that is, curricular subjects treated through a set of digital educational objects (OEDs) destined to the teaching and learning process for the History area. The contents were evaluated separately, considering criteria such as interactivity, complexity, accessibility, as well as specific criteria for the national curricular component “History”, previously presented by the edict (guidelines) of PNLD 2014.

By trying to break the boundaries of the printed materials, opening the way to multimedia content and teaching dynamics, the public notice of the PNLD 2014 allowed the presentation of different educational digital objects, namely: audiovisuals, infographics, simulators, electronic educational games, as well as hypermedia. The latter was framed by the edict as a hybrid type of OED, something that conjugated characteristics of other OEDs.

We consider that the incorporation of resources aimed at attending to the specificities of the new times, of the new students, is undeniably salutary. Among the outstanding features of the collections analyzed, it is possible to identify additive or quantitative changes, as well as qualitative or expressive ones, so that it is possible to use the perspective pointed out by Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig (2011).

It is noteworthy the quantitative gain made possible by the incorporation of multimedia content. This increase in the numbers of material available for use by the teacher and the student is undoubtedly a positive aspect, since it does not imply, for example, a substantial increase in the weight carried by the students on a daily basis. However, the addition did not imply quality.

Among the identified problems, we point to those related to the performance of games that, in general, by the typology itself, arouse little interest in students in the age group for which they are intended. The educational electronic games, even though they presented a certain regularity between the collections, varied minimally in the level of quality and showed very low interactivity. In this sense, we insist that the mere transposition of games originally contained in the printed version of the book for the digital format did not fulfill the function of becoming an auxiliary of the teacher and did not favored an autonomous historical thinking.

Regarding accessibility, as required by the PNLD 2014, several infographics did not present the possibility of expanding the sources that were small and arranged in simple spacing, which made it difficult to read texts and complementary information. Some content also had serious readability issues.

Finally, we can conclude that, contrary to what the MEC intended, the OEDs did not contribute to the historical thinking as the central objective of the teaching-learning of History, but basically reproduce the contents of the books, being the students subject only to the stimuli given by the teacher. The strongest evidence that the opportunity has been underutilized lies in the fact that in most OEDs there is no concern to address the difference between historical knowledge and actual historical experience. Despite a superficial discourse based on a concern for "new approaches", the selected collections do not attempt to problematize the use of historical sources.

Therefore, we see this public policy as a large-scale investment, but still of great limitations in terms of pedagogical effectiveness, due to a sensible lack of source, medium and tool criticism adequate to the digital age. Its approach underestimate students' levels of digital literacy and neglects, in practice, the potential of the digital media in making space for new, autonomous way of thinking/learning. What we see is that in such an age of transition, only acknowledging the changes and the potential of new technologies is not enough to take fully

profit of it - specially if technology is seen merely as a medium or simple tool, instead of a new research and teaching infrastructure.

Nota

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