

MAKING SENSE OF MR. PETER CLASSROOM

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This is the third MES Conference in which I participate. I'm very pleased to react to Karin's paper, but I feel also that it is a great responsibility. I must share something with you: this is my first English paper too. To grow as researcher and as person, I could not reject this challenge, and I must thank it publicly to João Filipe, who never gave up of challenging me in my research trajectory, and also to the organizers of MES for giving me such an opportunity.

WHO AM I?

I'm here because I'm a member of the Research Project's team Learning, Mathematics and Technology, whose leader is João Filipe Matos. I finished my masters degree, three years ago. In my thesis I wrote about learning as social practice and the professional development of primary school teachers using a situated learning approach.

My reaction to Karin's paper is done from my own point of view: someone who lives in Portugal, with both a specific trajectory and a historic and socio-cultural context, with also my own way of seeing and living; this means, with a precise way of participating in the world.

I react from the reality where I live now: a country from the Northern hemisphere that is part of the European Union. I am teacher, teacher educator and pedagogue engaged in teachers' pedagogical associations, where the participating teachers live their professional role as one way of engaging socially and politically in the Portuguese society. Their main principles are students' direct democratic participation and the collaborative organization of learning work to promote communication circuits among students.

My academic background is a generalist one: as former primary teacher, with a license in Sciences of Education and specialised in Pedagogical Supervision. So, I can say I was also math teacher. As a learner I was a very enthusiastic math learner: my relation with math was always a very good one – to solve math tasks was for me always like to solve a strategic game, a very playful challenging way.

Now I'm temporarily working in the Ministry of Education. I'm part of a team in charge of supporting teachers in the use of ICT in education and the curriculum development.

WHERE ARE WE?

Painting a very impressionistic picture, with a large brush, about the current Portuguese educational context, for those of you who have not heard so much about it in the last three years ...

During the last two years, we have had a government with majority of the socialist Party in the Parliament. This government is making the second major reform movement in the Portuguese society after our revolution, that started the 25th of April 1974. The first reforms after the revolution, as a result of the social movements that grew up in 1974 against the dictatorship, were made in a democratic sense of participation and of opening the society in general. Actual reforms are made in the context of the European Union, and the goals are such as the control of the public administration budget, to reduce the deficit of the national budget according to the needs of the European currency, the euro.

These constraints in the education domain added with the benchmarking studies between countries all over the world, where PISA comparative results are the most important ones, are the determinant factors that dictate educational reforms.

These reforms in the educational system are happening in fields like teachers' careers, teachers' assessment (the learners' assessment will have impact in teachers' assessment - a very new thing in Portugal) and also in the school management and school board. The government is also preparing huge investments related with ICT for schools: equipment, networks, availability of digital contents, teacher education, ...

All these are clearly neoliberal oriented reforms. Michael Apple talked about them eight years ago, at MES 2, here in Algarve. We live nowadays with these reforms as if they were inevitable in the current European context.

These reforms are taking place in Portugal, the European country where there is the largest gap between rich and poor people, where 45% of the youngest, in the range of 18 and 24 years old, do not complete secondary school, where 10% of the primary school pupils have to repeat at least one school year.

Nevertheless there are measures that clearly benefit families' and children' lives, mostly those from primary schools: now children stay more time in schools with organised activities by the local authorities after class time; they start to learn the first foreign language, the English. Mainly for primary schools, national teacher education programs for Portuguese, Mathematic and Experimental Sciences are being developed. Teachers, for the first time, are supervised in their classrooms during teaching time – similar with what is reported in this paper. This is the answer to the low results of the Portuguese learners in PISA tests. Consequences of these reforms are: teachers are obliged to spend more time in schools, after classes. They feel their role is more bureaucratized and they feel also much pressure over their shoulder.

As you can imagine we live times of great contradictions, both at national level with some social agitation – union supported – and at school level where the implications of these measures can be felt in the relationships between teachers and in the ways they work together.

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Having told you all those things about our country, I started to think directly about my reaction on Karin's paper ... and about how little I know about her country.

I don't know the orientation of the educational reforms in South Africa, I know very little about its history and about their pedagogical traditions. I know that it is a country in the southern hemisphere, where political and social movements had fought against the apartheid regime and they succeeded in eradicating it. I can imagine that there are being done great efforts of empowerment of the poorest populations and of education and training for all.

I thought this reaction could be an opportunity to know a little more about the relationship of the educational, research and social movements in South Africa.

This paper's presentation brought me thoughts at different levels: at global and national political level, and how the national reforms are related with the PISA studies; how the national reforms are implemented at the local level, schools' and classrooms' level – what is the relationship between the teachers and international comparative studies? Are they pressured about the results of their learners? How do they feel and what do they think about these international studies? What is the thinking of the mathematics' educators' movements in South Africa about this subject and how do they relate it with the efforts of empowering the poorest?

We all make choices about our participation in social movements at those different levels, both at an individual and social dimension. We all are immersed in socio-cultural contexts with specific features. Those contexts and their public can condition the way we express ourselves, the way we work and also the way we do research. Each of us has our own trajectory, a concept used by Wenger (1998). In our own trajectories we cross and participate in different kinds of communities of practice. Even at the same historical moment we participate in different communities: each one has their own practice. We draw in relation with each of the social groups where we live in different kinds of social belonging: some in a fuller way, some in a more peripheral way.

Describing practice is Karin's main concern, and she tried to do it in her paper. She did it in a very concrete way and, by reading the paper, I could understand what was happening in Mr. Peters' classroom. But, like other practices, this is also a very complex one. At this level the question could be: what is the intentionality of describing classroom practice?

Karin made her choices to describe us this specific teaching practice, in the on going movement of her trajectory as researcher: she made video recording of the interactions between the teacher and the learners, when they worked a syllabus topic (squares) over two weeks. As she reports the change on the teacher's intentionality, from the first week to the second week, there was a source of changes in the nature of the proposed tasks and in the way the teacher dealt in the public arena with the learners' expression of their thinking and reasoning.

Karin presents us with an interesting and fine analysis of what happened in these two weeks, but she interrogates also the way she did it – how to describe practice in a more rich and fruitful way? As Lave (1991) defines transparency: we only can see through the window, what the window's glass allows us to see; we cannot see through the wall and it is just beside the window. So the paper raises a lot of questions and questions are as important as answers.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

From my point of view, another way of describing those practices could let us perceive other subtle features.

From a situated learning point of view, the one that I know the best, we can raise questions about the kind of community of practice this classroom represents and about what kinds of practices are developed there. In this community we can observe different kinds of trajectories that meet each other in the same place, this classroom: the teacher's trajectory, the researcher's trajectory and the learners' trajectories.

a) What practices are being developed in this classroom: the teacher's practice of teaching? The learners' practice of learning? The researcher's practice of researching? How are these three practice related? Do they have a shared repertoire? What is their mutual engagement? Do they have a belonging sense?

b) What kind of artefacts is used in this classroom: teacher's discourse? The mathematical concepts and expressions? The blackboard and chalk? The paper? The learner's notebooks and pencils? Learner's discourses? The furniture and his distributions in the classroom? The videotape recorder? The sessions' transcriptions made by the researcher? The categorisation of the interactions made by the researcher?

c) What kind of identities is this community contributing to develop: the one from the teacher, those from the learners or the one from the researcher?

d) What meanings are there shared about the practice? What kind of trajectories are being developed there?

e) What answers do we find in this paper for these questions? Are they satisfactory answers for us? Why?

And I can go on asking...

Each practice in which we participate occurs and can be changed in a specific historic, political and socio-cultural context.

f) What external factors, historical and socio-cultural ones, affect the practice of that social group? And their other conceptual elements (meaning, identity, community) how are they also affected?

Only one more question:

g) What implications had this research for these learners and for the teacher?

And finally, all this can drive us to the question:

h) How do we deal, as researchers, with the methodological implications of the theories?

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