

COMPLEXITY AND THE DESIGN OF AN ONLINE WRITING COURSE OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper discusses and articulates the theoretical constructs considered by a teacher/researcher when designing an online writing course of English as a second language for public school teachers in São Paulo, Brazil. In the first part, the teacher/researcher will discuss and articulate the constructs by her considered before and during the design moment and that regard instructional design, writing production and complexity. In the second and third parts, by sharing the process of the design experience — some of the choices made, the challenges faced and the decisions taken — and a few of her reflections, the teacher/researcher expects to contribute with aspects to teachers to consider and to reflect on regarding language online courses being designed, offered and/or taken.

Introduction

It is a fact that the number of online courses being offered and taken is increasing day by day. However, special attention should be given to the design, implementation and management of these online courses because they cannot be a reproduction of the non virtual courses once we are dealing with a different environment, patterns of interaction, roles, and tools with knowledge being constructed in a different way.

Taking this into account, this paper, which is a narrative, has the objective of sharing my experience as a teacher/researcher when designing an online writing course of English as a second language for public school teachers in São Paulo, Brazil. Firstly, I will discuss and articulate the constructs I considered before and during the design moment which are related to complexity, writing and instructional design. Then, I will focus on the design process itself, mentioning its phases and some of the choices made, challenges faced and decisions taken. When sharing my design experience and reflecting about aspects that involved this particular online course, I expect to contribute and raise questionings to those who are designing, offering and/or taking online language courses.

The Theoretical Constructs

As this work aims at sharing the experience lived by me, a teacher/researcher, when designing an online writing course of English as a second language for public school teachers, it is important to mention the main constructs that give support to this research in progress. Therefore, in this section, I will present, discuss, and articulate aspects related to complexity, writing and instructional design.

Complexity

Paradigms are our unconscious view about things and the world (Morin, 2006, p. 10). They are not permanent because our values, beliefs, concepts and ideas are in constant evolution. Paradigms are in continuous change and are the result of the dissatisfaction in relation to the predominant existing models (Moraes, 2006, pp. 55–59).

This dissatisfaction also affects education. There is no more room for the existing paradigm that sees the student as an observer whose experience is not considered; sees the teacher as the person who detains and transmits knowledge; prioritizes the result and not the process; offers linear and reductionist curricula (subjects are not articulated or communicate); ignores dialogue and interactions, and fragmentizes, automates, detaches and individualizes (Behrens & Oliari, 2007, pp. 59–61; Moraes, 2006, p. 43). We need a new educational paradigm that aims at a knowledge that is not fragmented, compartmentalized, and reductive and recognizes the incompleteness and the unfinished of any knowledge (Morin, 2005, p. 11; 2006, p. 7). The substitution of the thought that isolates for one that unities, of the disjunctive and reductive thought for a complex one; “complex, in the original sense of the term *complexus*: what is weaved together” (Morin, 2005, p. 89).¹

The emerging paradigm, or complexity, sees the individual as a complete and integral human being. Complexity is seen as a theory that articulates the integrative thought; unities and allows a weave between the subject and the object, order and disorder, stability and movement, teacher and student. It considers all the events, actions and life interactions, not only using our reason but also considering our sensations, emotions, feelings and intuitions (Behrens & Oliari, 2007, p. 63; Mariotti, 2007, p. 139; Morin 2006, pp. 63–105; Moraes, 2006, pp. 71–73). It is the result of a collection of new conceptions, visions, discoveries and reflections (Morin, 2006, p. 77) in which the physical world can be seen as a net of relations (of inter-related events) and not a collection of isolated parts in a given order.

According to Morin (2005, pp. 95–96; 2006, pp. 74–77), seven inter-dependent principles help us think about complexity:

¹ All in-text citations have been translated by me.

1. *The systemic or organizational principle*: breaks with the linear idea of cause/effect, product/producer, structure/superstructure. We are products and producers and everything that is produced goes back to what produces in a self-constitutive, self-organized and self-productive cycle.
2. *The hologrammatic principle*: understands that not only the part is in the whole, but the whole is inscribed into the part.
3. *The principle of retroactive circuit or feedback*: is related to the fact that the cause acts on the effect and the effect on the cause modifying it.
4. *The principle of the recursive circuit*: products and effects are themselves producers and the cause of what is produced. The individuals, for example, produce the society in and through interactions, but the society produces the humanity of these individuals, providing them with language and culture.
5. *The principle of self-eco-organization*: explains autonomy/dependence once the subject can only be autonomous after his relations in a certain context. There is an autonomy/dependence relation in which the autonomy of the subject is inseparable of his dependence; that is, there is no possibility of autonomy without multiple dependences.
6. *The dialogical principle*: conceives dialogue between order, disorder and organization.
7. *The principle of the reintroduction of the cognoscente subject*: reintegrates the subject, his emotions, motivations, wishes, affections, culture and history in the process of knowledge construction.

Under the complexity perspective, knowledge is perceived and co-produced through our dialogue with the world (Morin, 2008, pp. 204–205), presupposing the participation of the individual and interaction with the object, the physical and social environments (Moraes, 2006, p. 88). To Morin (2005, p. 24) knowledge comprehends and stands, at the same time, operations of linkage (conjunction, inclusion) and separation (differentiation, opposition, selection, exclusion), in a circular process. It is constituted by mutable variables, by means of mutual, non linear or pre-determined enrichments, and gradually created when exploring connections, relations, integrations, and by living the process.

In view of this new paradigm there is the need to re-think the focus given to teaching/learning in order to re-dimension or consolidate perspectives and practices, and look for directives that would contemplate the paradigm transaction we live in. Morin (2005, pp. 11–16) believes we should consider the effects of knowledge compartmentation associated to the incapability to articulate, organize, contextualize and integrate it, once knowledge needs to be related to information and inserted in a context.

However, when designing an online course that would provide English teachers with the opportunity to develop their writing skills in a foreign language, it was also necessary to research about theories concerning writing. It is important to highlight, though, that the authors I present in the next section have not thought writing under the perspective of complexity, but I believe the aspects by them raised meet the perspective and therefore, can be considered.

Writing

After the 1980s there was a change in the research related to writing. Until this time the related research concerned the product but after it, they began investigating the process of composition. Writing, then, also begins to be seen as a process of meaning that needs generation, formulation and refinement of ideas; commitment; revision and interference during the process, and consciousness about a reader (Zamel, 1987, p. 267). Zamel perceives writing as a process of self-negotiation and discovery of meaning(s).

Cox also sees writing as a process, but, to the author, writing has the function of registering and keeping information, clarifying and sustaining thought. It is the teacher's role to be the observer, the facilitator, the model, the reader and sustainer, interfering in the work, structuring the writing context and helping the writer to understand the process (Cox, 1994, pp. 169–172). It is important to the writer to create a text, having as a reference his previous experiences, transmitting meanings and using a variety of formal aspects, transferring abilities and strategies from his mother tongue in a continuum that does not begin or finish with a single draft (Friedlander, 1996, pp. 109–110). Maybin emphasizes that, at the end of the process, writers have a major sense of propriety in relation to the work, feeling motivated once they have experienced learning opportunities, relating the classroom practice to the practice of the real world (1996, pp. 186–194).

According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996, pp. 303–304), during the writing process, there is the need to organize information, develop fluency, gain control over the additional vocabulary, use more complex structures, acquire maturity in relation to the style, and reflect about the purpose and the audience of the piece of writing. The authors believe procedures such as cooperative learning, instruction based on content, consciousness about the audience, language and editing, free writing, semantic mapping and graphics organizers help the writer in the process.

As we can notice most of the constructs related to writing refer to writing in English as a mother tongue and, not always, focus on the school context. However, Krashen (1984, p. 38) believes that the existing data demonstrates similarities in writing in a second language and writing in your mother tongue, suggesting that we should apply the existing theory for writing in English as a mother tongue to writing in English as a foreign language.

Taking into account the online course, it was also necessary to focus on instructional design. Once more, the authors I present in the following section have not thought about instructional design under the perspective of complexity. Even though, I believe the

aspects that will be presented and discussed below can be considered and applied under the light of complexity.

Instructional Design

When thinking about distance learning and instructional design, Palloff and Pratt (1999) meet the vision of the new educational paradigm once they see learning as an active process with knowledge construction and learning occurring by experimentation; manipulation and gain of abilities. According to them, distance learning allow learners to experience a new environment with new responsibilities, roles, rules, norms, patterns of interaction and ethical, spiritual, emotional and psychological matters, doing a collaborative work.

Abbey (2000), Berge, Collins, and Dougherty (2000), Driscoll (1998), Fullmer-Umari (2000), and Horton (2000) focus and refer to the systematic development of the content of a course with technological mediation and highlight the importance of identifying the needs of the participants. This will lead to the definition of the objectives, the different phases the learner will go through and the tools to be used. A “good design” (Driscoll, 1998, p. 9) that would meet the needs identified, requires interactivity (with the system, other participants, and the instructor), non linearity, an easy interface, structured lessons, effective use of the multimedia, attention to technological and educational details (clear objective, opportunities of practice and meaningful feedback), students’ control, and an environment in which participants are valued as individuals. Horton (2000, pp. 36, 406–431) emphasizes the importance of clarity in the materials made available; the need to define objectives and deadlines; number of participants; allocate the adequate amount of time to the activities; establish rules and procedures; clarify what is expected from participants (commitment, responsibility, participation); high quality of the material, rhythm and feedback. Driscoll (1998, p. 26) also focuses on the type of a pertinent program that can be:

- *Web/computer-based training*: individual learning that features drill and practice, simulations, reading, questioning, and answering;
- *Web/electronic performance support system*: just-in-time training focused on problem-solving, scientific method, experiential method, project method;
- *Web/virtual asynchronous classroom*: non-real-time group learning that employs experiential tasks, discussions, and team projects, and
- *Web/virtual synchronous classroom*: real-time collaborative group learning that uses discussions, problem solving, and reflection.

According to Abbey (2000), Berge et al. (2000), Driscoll (1998), Fullmer-Umari (2000), Horton (2000), and Palloff and Pratt (1999), when designing an online course we should pay attention to: its public, duration and number of participants; the sequencing and structuring of the objectives; the environment required (hybrid or totally virtual); the

equipment and how well the teacher and the students deal with the resources; the implicit learning theories, methods and materials selected; the content and validity of the instructions; the implementation, the management and the follow up that permeates the implementation process; and the evaluation of the phases that will assure that the objectives are reached and allow us to revise the course.

Therefore, complexity, writing and instructional design have been the constructs I considered for the design of this online writing course of English as a second language for public school teachers that I will present to you in the following section.

The Design Experience

The course design had different phases, not isolated but inter-connected ones, as a phase is the result and depends on the previous ones. Considering the theoretical constructs presented in the previous section, the focus was to design and provide public school teachers a course that would allow them to develop their writing skills in English as a second language. Thus, the course had as participants public school English teachers and me, once I had the role of teacher/researcher and I was responsible, up to the moment, for its design.

In a first phase, prior to the design, public high school English teachers helped me by answering a questionnaire that I devised and contained questions about their needs in relation to writing in English in their personal and professional life; their relation with writing; what their students needed to write in English; how familiar they were with the use of technology; their previous experience in relation to online courses and how they feel about them; their view about online courses, and their expectations in relation to an online course of writing in English as a second language. The objective was to gather information about this public in order to design a course that would suit their needs, wants and expectations, considering their life experiences, context and cultural imprinting.

Having as a starting point the information collected with the application of the questionnaire and considering the constructs related to complexity, writing and instructional design, a second phase, the design phase, began. Given its objective, public, the time the teachers have for their studies, their relation and familiarity with the use of technologies and writing and the aspects mentioned by Abbey (2000), Berge et al. (2000), Driscoll (1998), Fullmer-Umari (2000), Horton (2000), and Palloff and Pratt (1999) in relation to instructional design, I decided for a six-week asynchronous online course using a platform and not isolated tools available at Internet. Besides the fact that it would provide participants a digital learning experience, the objectives were to have: (1) a centralized teaching/learning environment that would ease access; (2) a space for information, reflections and notes; and (3) an environment for activities to be displayed, developed, and communication established. I also believed that a platform could promote more possibilities of interaction and reflection and a more adequate environment for the production of writings, negotiation and self-negotiation of meanings.

After having some information about the participants, and decided on the course duration and its environment, there was the need to decide on its structure, content and organization. The challenge, and the objective, was a course that aimed at knowledge construction (understood as systemic and complex), with writing seen as a process, under the light of complexity (Morin, 2005, pp. 95–96; 2006, pp. 74–77). A course that would allow participants to distinguish, globalize and contextualize. For me, the teacher/researcher, it was an attempt to face challenges; deal with the logical and the contradictory, the unpredictable, the non determinable; include the observer in the observation, considering the context and cultural imprinting, and looking for pertinent knowledge through means of collaborative work (Morin, 2004; 2006, pp. 63–70; 2008, pp. 196–273).

When trying to design the course that could contemplate the aspects addressed and presented in this paper, I felt the need to read about and have contact with courses, even if not online ones, that had the principles of complexity as a referential. In my search I came across Behrens (2006) and Moraes (2008). Behrens proposes the Methodology of Projects which aims at promoting and developing an educational activity (the investigation of possible answers for a problem) with autonomy and critical spirit, which would result in knowledge production with autonomy and critical spirit (1996, pp. 35–54). A problem would be a starting point that would allow and initiate the search for ways and answers. This search would require commitment; critical and ethical view; individual and/or group investigations that would allow the student to access different ways of learning, and, mainly, to learn how to learn, without memorizing information. Behrens (2006) believe that by problematizing, it is possible to create bonds to themes that belong to the surrounding reality, surpassing the certainties, creating room for reflexive processes, allow argumentation, and the statement of ideas. Moraes believes the key elements would be contextualized practices, individual and group reflections, cooperation, solidarity, and learning circumstances that would motivate the students, and proposes mediating questions as a methodology (2008, pp. 159–162). To the author, a well elaborated question can allow dynamics, dialogue, contextualization, recursivity, and processes of self-organization, autonomy and reflection regulating the learners' processes of development and learning (Moraes, 2008, p. 162). The challenge, however, is to elaborate questions that can start the learning process, not leading to obvious and simplifying explanations or the establishment of certainties or non questionable truths (Moraes, 2008, p. 163).

Considering and reflecting upon the constructs previously mentioned and the methodologies proposed by Behrens (1996) and Moraes (2008), my option was for a co-constructed course, with the teacher/researcher and the participants, together, deciding, working, discovering and constructing meaning. In order to make it possible, I decided to provide participants with situations that were, are or could be part of their professional or private lives. The objective was to make them reflect and discuss about the process of writing in English as a foreign language by recalling their theoretical-methodological-experiential background encouraging them to search individually or in groups for new information and knowledge, reinforcing their commitment to the process they were engaged, with critical and ethical view. I believed this would allow participants to reflect

about their contexts, reality, experiences and teaching practices. However, it is important to highlight that, even if the course had not been completely pre-design, it had an initial structure that contemplated text planning; drafting; revision; editing; structural, grammatical and stylistic aspects. I believed these aspects, when explored by participants, would help them develop their work in a collaborative way.

Then, with the definition of the structure, content, themes, theoretical and methodological aspects, part of the material designed and links selected, and considering various patterns of interaction, it was time to transport things to the platform. Although I expected it to be simple, I faced some difficulties of practical nature. I needed time to adjust to the new environment. Not mastering all the tools and not being fully aware of the limitations the platform offered, it was difficult, for example, to name sections, to decide on how and where to group and display information and instructions, how to organize and display files and tasks. Things had been planned on paper but some needed to be adjusted to suit the platform, others seemed to work differently in the new environment, and some were left open on purpose, as the objective was to have a co-created online course.

Final Considerations

The challenge to design an online course is a fact. Experiencing online courses as a student is something. Being responsible for an online course is completely different. I faced, for example, operational challenges because it was the first time I was dealing, as a teacher, with the platform and its tools. Secondly, as a teacher/researcher I am used to designing courses, for the non virtual environment, thinking about their structures, contents, materials, theoretical and methodological aspects, duration and participants. However, having to do it, for and in this new and different environment, with different roles and patterns of interaction was extremely challenging.

Furthermore, I tend to believe that to design an online course under the light of complexity, was even a bigger challenge. Looking back at the experience and the course design itself, I can say that there was an attempt to work with knowledge in a non isolated or fragmented way, counting on the experiences and feelings, establishing relations and integrations in order to try to contemplate the principles proposed by Morin (2005, pp. 95–96; 2006, pp. 74–77). I believe it was an attempt to offer the opportunity of mutual, non linear or pre-determined enrichments through relations, interactions and connections due to the way its structure, content, themes, theoretical and methodological aspects, materials and links were thought, proposed and made available. Another aspect to be considered is that it was co-constructed by me, the teacher/researcher, and the participants.

Although for the moment I have reached my objective, I am sure this research cannot stop here. It is, in fact, a work in progress. I believe some important discoveries and achievements have been made but there is room for other attempts, challenges, experiences, relations, and the need for more studies about courses, especially online

ones, which are or were thought, designed, implemented and managed under the light of complexity.

I do hope that by sharing this experience I could generate reflections that can contribute to teachers formation, by helping us think about and question the online courses being designed, offered and/or taken, in order for us to re-think and eventually re-design them.

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