THE ETWINNING PROJECT: A STUDY WITH PORTUGUESE 9TH GRADE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present a pedagogical experience with 9th grade Portuguese students attending an eLearning Programme of the European Union named eTwinning Project. The main goal of this EU project is to create a network of collaborative work between European schools, involving all school levels in the development of common projects through the use of Information and Communication Technologies, specially the Internet. The eTwinning Project we present in this paper was named *Crossing the Borders* and engaged a Portuguese school in Braga, Portugal and a similar school in the Czech Republic during the school year of 2006/2007. The implementation of an innovative and motivating strategy was at the basis of the project. It should promote not only a broad range of ICT skills, but also the students' moral and social development. In this paper we present the results of a semester of electronic twining experience.

Key words: eLearning, eTwinning, ICT, blog, citizenship competencies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union pursues the goal of becoming the world's most competitive economy, based upon the conception of a new Europe, whose economy is based on knowledge and therefore strongly investing in Education and Training. In order to attain such goals, the European Commission has been engaged in concentrating on matters such as social cohesion, employability, access to information and info- exclusion since the very beginning of the new millennium.

If Europe grasps the opportunities presented, the Information Society promises to deliver a range of benefits, including higher living standards, entrepreneurial opportunities to participate in new growth markets, changes to the ways in which existing products and services are produced and delivered with productivity gains, more fulfilling jobs using advanced technologies and flexible working arrangements. These same technologies will enable workers to upgrade their skills as part of a process of lifelong learning designed to improve their employment prospects and earnings, and enhance education and learning in schools. (European Commission, 2000b: 3)[3].

The advent of the Knowledge Era raised the need to draw new lines to promote a society of information, which is available to everyone. The European Council held in Lisbon in March 2000 established the beginning of the eEurope debate (Information Society available to all), in which issues such as information, the new economy and the implications of the digital era were discussed.

On May 24th of the same year the European Commission adopted the eLearning initiative as a means to reflect upon the future of Education and the need to define the plans necessary to achieve the goals of the eEurope.

The eTwinning Project consists of part of the eLearning Programme of the European Union. The main goal of the project is to create a network of collaborative work between European schools, involving all school levels in the development of common projects through the use of Information and Communication Technologies, especially the Internet.

ETwinning is a long term association between at least two European schools which use ICTs as tools to develop relevant pedagogic activities. (CRIE, 2006)[7].

These activities intend to be a catalysing force which might promote the development of a wide range of skills which should be optimized: learning to learn, sharing points of view, making friends, and promoting greater awareness of the new model of the European society – a multilingual and multicultural one. The use of ICT is faced as a means to enable and produce communication. It is a valuable contribution in terms of changing and reorganizing pedagogical methods. This idea is expressed by the official authorities in Portugal as so one can read in the diploma the following suggestion to ICT teachers for 9th and 10th grades classes:

EU faces challenges of diverse origins that urge for reflection. Those are questions of citizenship and democratic intervention that must be analysed in a more holistic way taking advantage of ICT potential. In order to attain such goals we suggest students participate in european projects, namely the ones that make use of the internet facilities. (CRIE, 2006, p. 5)[7].

In the same curricular orientations policies it is expressed that "the development of small projects should be a priority, starting in the beginning of the school year, with particular emphasis in the 9th grade (…)". (CRIE, 2006, p.6) [7]

The idea of starting the eTwinning project together with a school from the European Union emerged from this context of

2. THE ETWINNING PROJECT

The eTwinning Project **Crossing the Borders** is an electronic twinning between the Colégio Teresiano in Braga, Portugal and the ZS T.G.Masaryka, Opava (Czech Republic) during the school year of 2006/2007.

The implementation of an innovative and motivating strategy was at the basis of the project. It should promote not only a broad range of ICT skills, but also the students' moral and social development.

From the beginning, the twinning with an Opavian School in the Czech Republic aimed towards the use of a foreign language (English) as well as citizenship and multiculturalism awareness using ICT as vehicle and object of study.

The following aims were set by the two partner schools and lied at the basis for the eTwinning Project:

> We would like to introduce and develop cultural links between our countries. We hope that our pupils will feel more comfortable when using English and that they will learn a lot about areas such as citizenship and cultural differences using ICT tools.

The project is being monitored by an English teacher in the Czech Republic and an ICT teacher in Portugal. It is being developed by teenagers of the same age: 56 students in Portugal and 19 students in the Czech Republic.

The Project wishes to increase students level of ICT literacy, the proficiency in using virtual communication tools and the use of English as a foreign language. Moreover, is also intended to achieve the following goals:

ICT Objectives

- Promoting the use of ICT as a means to a generalized digital literacy level, prevent info-exclusion and the equality of opportunities between European students.
- Raising awareness to the need for lifelong learning as a necessary condition to adapt to new situations and solving problems in a knowledge society;
- Promoting autonomy, creativity, responsibility and team work as necessary features for students to be open to change, cultural diversity and active citizenship;
- Increasing students' interest in research, problem solving and innovation as a means to face challenges in a knowledge-based society.
o Developing the ability to thoroughly use computer applications, namely in articulating them with information and technologies from other fields of knowledge;
- Developing the ability to research, handle, produce, communicate, exchange, cooperate and share information not only through traditional means, but also using modern information and communication technologies;
- Respecting the safety and exchange rules of virtual data sharing, without neither place nor time restrictions.

English language skills

- Acquiring basic (essential) communication skills in English as a foreign language;

teaching using a methodology of project work.

- Understanding oral and written pieces of information of different types which are adequate to students' linguistic, psychological and social development;
- Producing oral and written essays which are adequate to students' linguistic, psychological and social development;

Citizenship and social skills

- Reflecting upon their own social and cultural reality through exposure to different cultures;
- Raising awareness of their individuality through family, project peers and schoolmates integration;
- Developing sociability, tolerance and cooperation skills.

3. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The eTwinning Crossing the Borders Project began on 29th September 2006 and will finish in the end of May 2007. The electronic twinning with the ZS T.G.Masaryka happened as a result of a combination of both teachers' proposals, possible thanks to the automatic research and proposal mechanism which makes it possible to find compatible and converging projects (twin finder). After some email contacts, the teachers outlined the plan for the activities they intended to implement throughout the year, in conformity with the National Syllabus for ICT (9th grade) and English and the annual planning of both subjects.

Figure 1 -Print Screen of the introductory blog *Post,* in which the Crossing the borders project and the teachers are presented

The teachers presented their projects and corresponding aims and activities to their classes in October and November. They simultaneously started the process of planning and creating supporting environments: the virtual space in the eTwinning platform, a moodle subject and a collaborative blog.

The evaluation of this experience is based on 6 instruments: a questionnaire about ICT literacy, a questionnaire to evaluate students perceptions (4.1), interviews to English Teachers involved in the project, teacher's e-mail contents analyses, Collaborative Blog´s interactions analyses and products (works) analyses (4.2).

A final report will be performed in order to evaluate:

- Whether there has been a successful development in the way students work;
- Whether these tools are actually useful in a curricular context;
- Whether the project helped to increase students' interaction;
- Whether there has been active participation of all the students;
- Whether the project led to meaningful learning;
- Whether great changes in methodology have taken place;
- Whether there has been a good work environment;
- Whether the project helped the students improve their level of autonomy in the use of these tools;
- Whether they were faced with any problems related to the use of the tools;
- Whether the level of motivation to learn English increased;
- Whether the students have become more aware of the cultural differences between the two countries.

4. SOME RESULTS

Although the study isn't finished, we will present some results about the conclusions of the students' perceptions questionnaire and the product's evaluation and analyses.

4.1. "Students perceptions"

When students were asked about the most positive aspects, they corresponded with vast feedback. We identified convergence points, about some subjects, which were organized in topics, so that could be read and understood.

The improvement of the ability to use computer applications

- We enjoyed working in the project because we developed abilities of text processing, creation of presentations and we could improve our competences in English language. We knew that our works would be seen by the Czechs, therefore we worked a lot.
- It was very interesting. We organized the ideas, we wrote the texts, we edited the works in the Word and the PowerPoint, and the teachers of English and ICT corrected them.
- "I liked creating a blog, writing posts and commenting posts of my colleagues.

- "We sent e-mails, we published posts in the blogs, and we placed our works in the eTwinning platform."

Autonomy, creativity and responsibility promotion

- "This was a funny and challenging way of working about interesting subjects.
- "What was difficult in the beginning, started to become easier."

Team works promotion

- "It was complicated because I had to write everything in English, and I am not a regular student in English, but my pair helped me.
- "In my group we helped each other, when it was really complicated, we asked the teacher."

Increase of the students' interest in research, problem solving and innovation.

- "When I wanted to say something in English that I didn't know I searched in the on-line translator and I got it."
- "Initially I had difficulty on placing the works in the platform, but now it is very easy . "

Acquire basic communication skills in English

- "I was interested to be able to communicate with the eTwinning partners, so I developed competences of English language."

Reflecting upon their own social and cultural reality through exposure to different cultures

- "We feel good when we understand that there are more people of our age, with equal problems."

The increase of the knowledge about Portugal

- "I liked because I knew some Portuguese monuments that I didn´t know."
- "It was important because I learned about Braga."

The increase of the knowledge Czech Republic

- "We learned a lot about Opava."
- "I learned Czech Republic geography, about their schools, how they have fun (…)"

Development of sociability, tolerance and cooperation skills

- "Now, I know that it's very easy to make friends, although speaking a different language.
- "There are lots of schools in all Europe developing projects similar to this one."
- "Czech girls are very nice and boys are shy."
- "We invited them to visit Portugal, but it wasn't possible."

Students were questioned about the negative aspects of the experience. Through the answers, it was possible to organize data, and make categories with similar point views. We found 2 hot points: the communication and the differences of the knowledge level between the 2 groups.

Asynchronous communication

- "We would prefer to chat on-line with our partners on Messenger or in the virtual space in the platform."

Differences between the both groups

- "I would like to have more partners. We were 55 and they were just 17."
- "Our partners had lot of problems in writing in English."
- "The Czech students didn't answer my questions."

- "They have an inferior level of knowledge in English and ICT."

4.2. ICT Skills

In the first stage of the Project, the following task was performed – creating a self-portrait of each of the students involved in the project. The students used Microsoft Word to perform this tasks.
Word processing is an important section of the ICT syllabus, so it was used both as a tool to create the profiles and object of study. This unit is eminently practical, so students should be given opportunities to practice. The teacher (…) should assign a practical task, in which students must use editing and formatting techniques and also the styles and models at their disposal. The products of that assignment should then be used to evaluate the students. (ICT syllabus, p. 22)[10].The need to create the self-portraits was chosen as pretext to use *Word Processing* as a tool. At first, the profiles were written in English in the English classes. Then, they were corrected by the English teacher. After that, the potential of word processing tools was presented and discussed in ICT classes. Finally, after the texts and corresponding images had been edited and formatted, the students' profiles were ready to be posted.In creating their profiles, the students described themselves in terms of their psychological and personality features (the students did not describe themselves physically, because photographs were posted together with their profiles), they also described their families, habits, hobbies and artistic preferences: music, favourite films, favourite sports (as performers and viewers), favourite school subjects and other personal interests. The personal details involved in these tasks, made it possible for the students to get to know each other better and also to establish new bonds with some elements of the classes. After their profiles had been posted, students were able to comment their colleagues' profiles by editing posts in the collaborative blog.
The collaborative blog is available on www.crossing-the-borders.blogspot.com. It was created as a collaborative tool for student interaction as a place where students could publish information (text and image) which everyone would access and contribute to. This would enable communication between all project members.

By allowing multiple authorship and creating the possibility of several co-collaborators to publish posts and comment on existing messages, blogs can become not only spaces where people can publish information, but also spaces of true communication." (Gomes, 2005, p. 43)[9].
This virtual space was then used by the students to comment on their profiles and also to Exchange emails and personal photographs. According to Gomes (2005)[9], Coutinho (2006, 2007)[4],[5] and Birney, Barry & Eigeartaigh (2006)[1], the creation and dinamization of blogs with educational purposes should be implemented as a way to develop several social skills and to promote learning.
An important work dynamics was created in which it was possible to optimize students' critical spirit, autonomy, creativity, responsibility and team work skills, as well as a stronger openness to change, cultural diversity and active citizenship. (ICT syllabus, p.4)[10]
The second stage of the project was based on exchanging information about both towns: Braga and Opava. The presentation of both towns (Braga and Opava) happened in December, in articulation between three subject areas: English, ICT and Project Area.

The document which regulates the guidelines for ICT (9th and 10th grades) recommends that "ICT teachers should promote small projects together with teachers of other subjects, in articulation with the teacher of Project Area (…) (CRIE, 2006, p.6)[7]. Therefore, our intention was to promote interaction between several curricular subjects, so that it would be possible to correlate information and knowledge among different curricular areas.
The elaboration of student´s town´s electronic presentation was done in groups using Microsoft Powerpoint. At first, students explored this application and acquired fundamental skills in terms of its use as done in previous author´ s experiences (Coutinho & Rocha, 2006)[6]. Using it as a supporting tool in their work, they then created the electronic presentations of their towns in Portugal and in the Czech Republic, in which aspects related to culture, tradition, landscape and history would be some of the aspects to be presented.

Products	Portuguese works	Czech works
Self-Portrait (Microsoft Word)	55	17
My country and traditions (Microsoft PowerPoint)	25	17
My town (Microsoft PowerPoint)	25	17

Table 1 – Products

The purpose of this task was to raise reflection upon students' own social and cultural reality through the comparison and confrontation with aspects of another culture. The presentations were created using electronic presentations, blogs and video. All the works were filed in eTwinning virtual space. All the students have a password with which they could access the information.
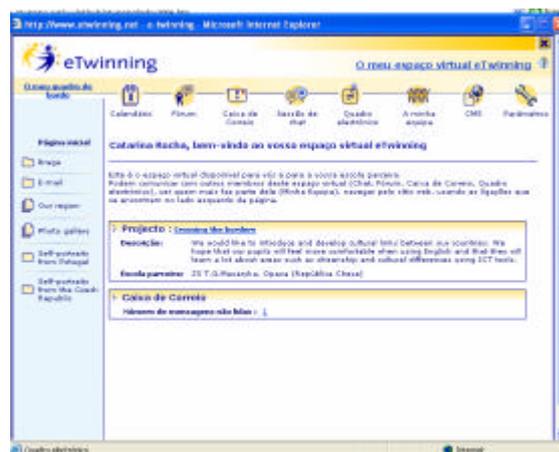
Figure 2 – Print Screen of the virtual space at the eTwinning Platform

URL of the subject:
http://www.nonio.uminho.pt/moodle/course/view.php?id=200
URL of the blog: www.crossing-the-borders.blogspot.com
URL of the Etwinning platform: www.etwinning.net

5. FINAL REMARKS

We hope that the Project will be a strategy of pedagogic innovation and that it will lead to positive outcomes in terms of the students' learning and teaching skills. We also wish to help our students develop the ability to learn, individually and together with other students, to share points of view, make new friends and become aware of the European model as a multilingual and multicultural one.

Technologies considerably multiply the amount of available information and they create the possibility to produce and publish materials. Therefore, the use of ICTs is vital for the development of this project. We fully agree with Castells [2], who sates that "technology is society and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools." (Castells, 2000:25)[2].

The equality of opportunity in terms of accessing and sharing information is a necessary condition for a network society (Dias, 2006). Paulo Dias[8] calls attention to the emerging need to equalize the level of opportunity in accessing information. In conclusion, the use of the Internet was essential for the development of our twinning.

The Internet brought our worlds closer together; it connected them by crossing the borders of time and space. All the students who took part in the project had the possibility to access all the information available on the net and, in particular, they had the opportunity to access and participate in the creation of the information of the eTwinning platform, the collaborative blog and the moodle subject. This opportunity allowed them to research, select, share and use the information. These skills are mentioned in the Curricular Guidelines for ICTs in 9th and 10th grades:
"it is our aim that the activities developed in ICT classes are predominantly practical, so that, from the first moment on, students will be active users of the computers and the Internet, so as to create situations in which autonomy can be promoted and therefore letting students play the role of explorers monitored by the teacher." (CRIE, 2006, p.5)[7].

The project was useful in terms of fundamental skills such as Word processing, creation of powepoint presentations, adequate use of the Internet , email, blog and electronic platform and file transfer, but also other types of aims were reached, namely in terms of students' citizenship and sociability skills and their awareness of tolerance, cooperation, multiculturalism and team work.

This project allowed for us to increase and improve the critical analysis of the functions and power of the new information and communication technologies.

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