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***Back to the Future: Legacies, Continuities and Changes in Educational
Policy, Practice and Research***

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Table of Contents

1. About the Conference.....	9
1.1. Main Theme and Subthemes	11
1.2. Committees	13
2. FULL PAPERS	15
THEME 1 - TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	17
2 - A Self-study Theoretical Framework for Teachers' Learning and Teaching of a Topic	19
8 - Induction Workshops as Reflective Support Groups for Beginning Teachers.....	24
10 - The Fuzziness of Failing Student Teachers – Indicators and Procedures	30
26 - TPACK: Challenges for Teacher Education in the 21st Century.....	37
28 - The BeTeBaS-Questionnaire: an Instrument to Explore the Basic Skills of Beginning Secondary Teachers	45
34 - Why Do Teachers Teach? A Phenomenological Insight Into Teachers' Philosophy.....	53
39 - Teacher Education and the Best-Loved Self	60
53 - Literacy teachers' didactic choices	69
54 - Utilising case study to develop an interpretive theory to address organizational and individual issues in teacher learning in a school site.....	76
57- Academics' Perceptions with respect to their Teaching, Research and Management	86
60 - Researching Impact of Targeted CPD on Teachers' Professional Attitudes and Classroom Practices	93
73 - Inclusion in Brasil: A Collaborative Consultation Program as Support for Teachers in Public Schools	102
77 - Measurement of Professional Competence in the Domain of Economics of University Students in Economics and in Business and Economics Education – Comparison of the (Old) Diploma and the (New) Bachelor Degree.....	111
82 - Developing the Pedagogical Sharing in the Preservice Teacher Education	121
88 - Personal and Professional Development of Teachers of the Early Years of Schooling in Higher Education Distance: Reflections from Brazilian's Research	130
90 - Convergence Between Practice and Professional Development of Teacher Educators in Pedagogy Courses in the Light of Curriculum Development Theories	137
95 - Education Policies and Teachers' Professional Development: The Perceptions of Elementary School Teachers	145
97 - Research as a Regular Part of the Subject Didactics in the Teacher Education.....	155
103 - Memory, Youth And Culture Education: A Focus On Development Of Teaching	160
106 -	167

109 - Survey – Intervention: Teacher Training from a Professional Development Perspective on On-line Continuous Training Courses.....	174
112 - Contextualistic Insight to Judging Good Practice: Dynamics of Professional, Situational, and Personal Contexts in Teaching.....	180
127 - Professional Mathematics Teacher Identity in Pre-service South African Teachers: A Case Study	189
142 - Brazilian University and National Network of Continuing Education of Teachers: Boundaries and Advances to Professional Development.....	204
147 - Social Representations of Teachers about Teaching: Professional Dimensions	212
148 - Perceptions about Collaborative Consultation in the View of Reflective Field Notes Constructed by Teachers in Regular Public School	219
150 - Student Teaching Abroad and the Development of the Culturally Competent Classroom Teacher: Transformation from Diverse Experience.....	226
162 - New Teachers’ Working Experience: A Secondary Analysis of TALIS	233
167 - Who are the Teacher Trainers? A Gender Perspective	243
179 - The Best Mirror is a Critical Friend: Pathways to Critical Friendship.....	247
183 - (R)Evolutionary Road: A Preliminary Discussion upon Changes in Academia and its Professionals	257
184 - Perceptions of Physical Education Teachers in the Exercise of the Profession- a qualitative approach	266
187 - Reinterpretation of the Experiences of Teacher Education and Professional Development: the Role of Interactions among Pre-service Teachers and their Trainers.....	274
190 - Universities and the Professional Preparation of Teachers in Scotland: an Uneasy Alliance?.....	281
199 - The Professional Program of Teacher Education. The Representation of the Students.....	291
201 - Implicit in Teaching: a Contribution to the Development of the Proficient Teaching.....	302
207 - Reform and Recontextualization of Policies: the Role of Supervisors in Brazilian Public Schools.....	314
208 - Relating Self-study to Life History: A New Approach to the Study of Teaching Practices	323
229 - Teachers’ Voices: The Professional Lives of Icelandic Teachers.....	327
236 - Teaching of French in Upper Secondary Education: Improvement of Interactive Speaking Proficiency through Peer Feedback.....	334
244 - Teacher Professional Development through a Teacher-as-Curriculum Maker Lens	342
251 - Developing Experience-Based Principles of Practice for Teaching Teachers	353
258 - The Impact of Organizational Climate in Schools on the Transfer of Post-initial Master Studies	362
263 - Nursing Teacher Formation: Experience-Based Learning.....	373
266 - Understanding Teachers’ Work and Cultures: An Organizational Analysis of the Changes Occurred in a “Cluster of Schools” in the Context of the Recent Portuguese Educational Reforms.....	382
270 - The (in)Visible Body in the Nation-Wide Syllabi Parameters Elementary School	392
273 - REFORMULATION OF UNDERGRADUATE COURSES IN BRAZIL: NEW DIRECTIONS?.....	402

281 - The Teacher Training Literacy: Approaches, Processes and Practices	411
288 - Teacher Development Through Iterative Processes – Learning Study and Design-based Research	420
290 - Formative Process in Veredas Project and Reflexes in Pedagogical Practice of Participants	428
291 - The Importance of Training Didactic-Pedagogical in Postgraduation Courses	436
293 - Coming to Know in the Eye of a Storm: A Beginning Teacher’s First Year of Teaching.....	444
306 - Chinese Teachers’ Perceptions of Professional Development: Findings from Ongoing Research.....	457
311 - Teaching and Teacher Training: A Vicious or Virtuous Circle?	464
312 - Teachers-researchers: Between what they think and what they do	469
328 - New Teachers in Collaborative Work: Physical or Virtual?	481
338 - How Do We Define and Evaluate Preschool Quality? Swedish Pre-school Teachers in a Discursive Crossfire	487
341 - The Teaching Practice, The School as <i>locus</i> of Training and the Mentors of the Teacher Training in Initial Pedagogy Training.....	493
348 - Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Brazilian Student Teachers of Physical Education in Situations of Teaching Practice	502
364 - World Bank, IMF and WTO and the Interference in the Brazilian Educational Policies at the end of the Twentieth Century and in the First Decade of The Twentieth Century	512
365 - Teacher Education Policies in Brazil From 1990 to 2010: The Education Course in Question	521
379 - The Pedagogical Formation of Postgraduate Students for Higher Education in a Brazilian Public University	531
384 - The Didactic Knowledge of First Cycle Teachers in the Teaching of Geometry	539
393 - Faculty Seminars as Means for Teacher Educators' Professional Development.....	548
396 - Teacher Professional Development Programmes in Mathematical Literacy, Natural Sciences and Technology Education: Establishing Foundational Features	555
397 - Student Research and Service-Learning for Community Enhancement: Case studies	563
THEME 2 - EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT	571
3 - New Scopes for the Training of Educational Administrators, Based on a Reflection on Their Role	573
5 - Enhancing Teachers Agency with Valuing Them: The Link Between Teacher-rated Servant Leadership of Principals and Teachers’ Perceived Empowerment	579
17 - A Study on Perceived Principal Support and Principal-Teacher Communication with Teacher Job Satisfaction among the Key High School in Xi an, China.....	585
43- School Principals in Spain: From a Bureaucratic Orientation to Educational Leadership.....	594
44- A Research Project on Learning-Centered Leadership and its Impact on Improving Academic Achievement in Spain	603
45 - Towards the Reinterpretation of Curriculum Leadership with a Focus on Its Relation to the Professional Learning Community.....	612

98 - A 'Learning Community': A Process Analysis Intended to Serve as a Collaborative Model for Teacher Training	621
126 - Teaching Self-Efficacy and Burnout: a Brazilian Study	634
138 - The Shared Construction of Reading and Writing: Diversified Activities in the Classroom.....	644
139 - Professorshipness Actions: The Building of Teaching Learning	651
286 - Academic Self-Efficacy and Learning and Study Strategies: Brazilian Students' Perceptions	659
327 - Support to Educational Leadership From School Counselors. The Spanish Case	668
339 - Challenges to Promoting Quality in Pre-Service Practicum Experiences.....	676
350 - Efficacy Beliefs at School: Perceptions of Principals, Teachers and School Collective	685
THEME 3 - LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS	691
40 - Service-learning as a Model for Establishing Partnerships between Student Teachers and their School Communities: Opportunities and Challenges.....	693
79 - Social Networks as Spaces for the Professional Development of Teachers	699
85 - Teacher Professionalism and Professional Development in Communities of Practice – The Case of Collaborative Groups	706
166 -A Model for Utilising Social Networking for Academic Adjustment Purposes	712
185 - Signs of Construction of a Professional Development Community in Language Education: A Case Study.....	722
245 - Gift-giving Technologies as a Learning Tool	737
247 - An Awareness-action Framework for Engaged and Transformative Schools Advancing Educational Equity and Inclusion with Communities	746
330 - Empowered Students and Teachers-researchers: Sharing Knowledge with Each Other	757
333 - Older People Motivations and Interests in Learning Computers A Grounded Theory Study.....	767
342 - MediaIntertalking An International Learning Community on Media Literacy	778
358 - Schools - The Art of Weaving Networks in Education.....	788
404 - Instrumental Group Teaching: An Agenda for Democracy in Portuguese Music Education	796
THEME 4 - TEACHING IN A DIGITAL CULTURE.....	803
7 - Synote: A Free Collaborative Multimedia Web Technology Helping Teachers and Students Transform Teaching and Learning in Schools, Colleges and Universities	805
18 - Between Cutting Edge and Bidonville: A Reflection about Elearning	813
20 - Homeschooling: Perspectives of Learning without an Educational Institution Before the New Technologies	820
101 - Beyond to the " <i>Deficit of Meaning</i> " in Science Teaching: An Experience of Tutoring at the Open University of Brazil.....	827
128 - A Proposal for the Evaluation of Educational Robotics in Basic Schools	831

159 - Digital Medias in School: the “Everlasting” Transitional Phase? Appropriation and Perspectives Found among Students and Teachers.....	840
237 - High School Students’ Satisfaction with Studying Mathematics by Themselves Using Learning Object Material.....	849
285 - Educating Teachers in ICT: from Web 2.0 to Mobile Learning	855
292 - Audiovisual Materials and Environmental Education: Experiences of Teachers in a High School	865
315 - Digital Literacy and the Construction of Meaning.....	872
315 - Laptops for Students: Strength and Weakness of the Portuguese Initiatives	878
315 - Citizen Digital Emancipation and 1 to 1 Model: New Cognitive Regimes for the Use of Laptops in Schools?	884
322 - Digital Natives: What and How Much they Learn While They’re Playing Online	891
354 - The Impact of Digital Technologies and the Suffering Psychological of the Teacher Before the Teaching and Learning Process.....	897
355 - From Homo Sapiens to Homo Zappiens: Psychological Suffering of Teachers Before the Digital Technologies	904
355 - M-learning in the Process of Teaching and Learning: Reflections and Opportunities	908
355 - Immersive Learning: a Current Future for Graduate and Postgraduate Programmes	915
357 - The Potential of E-learning in ICT Training Teachers.....	925
388 - Continuous Teacher Formation in Virtual Learning Environments: Risks of Depersonalized Pedagogical Relations	931
401 - Teacher Learning in Transition: Participatory Practices in Digital Age Environments.....	939
THEME 5 - CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION	949
81 - University Students and Teachers International Mobility - Is it Worth?	951
107 - Educational Policies in Brazil and Portugal: <i>The Local Government</i>	958
160 - Current Demands for Teaching in Higher Education - The Role of Students.....	965
170 - Crafting Programs to Stimulate Student Engagement and Persistence in Higher Education.....	973
204 - Teachers’ Assessment at the University of Alicante: Prospects and Actions	982
205 - Internal Quality Assurance at the University of Alicante: Process and Prospective	988
240 - Design of Media: Didactic Guide to Competences Development.....	997
272 - Being a University Teacher in Times of Change - The Academic Profession and its Reconfigurations	1003
282 - Investigating Lecturers’ Social Representations of University Assessment Policies: The Case of	1011
304 - Monitoring Student Progress System - A Portuguese Discussion Proposal.....	1018
310 - Professional Hierarchy, Vocation and Higher Education	1027

316 - Freshmen University Students in Latin America: What Young Students at Universidad Nacional De Córdoba Know, Do And Think About ICT	1035
320 - Academic Dishonesty- Understanding How Undergraduate Students Think and Act.....	1043
334 - Mathematics Intervention Programme as a Mediating Tool to Enhance Student Teachers' Learning and Teaching of Mathematics: an Activity Theory Approach.....	1051
360 - History of the Law in the Curriculum: Analysis of an Experience	1063
THEME 6 - RESEARCH, KNOWLEDGE AND CHANGE	1071
4 - Tracking Beginning Teachers' Orientations of Diversity – Why do they Change?.....	1073
21- Teaching Mathematics Using Inductive Approach Enhances Learning: A case of Grade 11 Classes in Gauteng Province, South Africa	1084
41 - Assessing the Quality of Research: Development of a Framework.....	1092
67 - Traces of Europe: Whether the National Curriculum in Sweden Supports Teaching and Critical Discussion about European Identity.....	1097
72 - Conceptions of Portuguese Primary School Teachers about Science Education: Their Relevance in Innovative Classroom Activities	1105
140 - Challenges of the Studies 'State of the Art': Research Strategies in Post-Graduation	1112
143 - Higher Education	1121
217 - Effectiveness of Cognitive Conflict Strategy In A Humanity Class.....	1130
256 - A Zimbabwean Chemistry Teacher's Practices and Beliefs about the Teaching and Learning of Stoichiometry Concepts at Ordinary Level.....	1145
264 - Education for Citizenship in Spain: Students' Conceptions of Citizenship in Secondary Schools.....	1159
277 - Territories and Rural Education in the Serras do Brigadeiro	1166
318 - Problem Setting and Reflections on One Teacher- Students Be Subjects of the Relationship with Knowledge in Physical Education Classes?.....	1175
347 - External Evaluation of Schools in Portugal: Framework and Results	1185
356 - Science Textbooks as Questioning and Problem-Based Teaching and Learning Promoters: Change or Continuity?	1190
361 - Photographic Images of Teachers: a Visual Journey of Teachership in Municipal Schools of Rio de Janeiro in the end of the 19 th Century and Beginning of the 20 th Century	1199
369 - A New Exportation of Technology Island: Inquiring the Science Background Parents Expectations in Science Curriculum of Waldorf School in Taiwan.....	1206

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18 - Between Cutting Edge and Bidonville: A Reflection about Elearning

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Abstract: In this paper we reflect about the liquid times we live in and its implications in the teaching and learning in universities. The technological realities take place at a furious pace that turns novelty into an ephemeral thing in space and time. We are always running, not always knowing where to go, if we want to go or get there. The Internet access is uneven and reinforces previous existent inequalities. In teaching using technology, these issues are hardly considered, and the technocratic discourse is multiplied. In cases of institutionalized and conventional elearning processes that use learning management platforms (aka LMS), these issues are obliterated, mimicking a formal education and an obsolete disciplinary compartmentalization of knowledge. The e-portfolio seems to be an alternative to these platforms. If computers are seen as machines of communication rather than representation, it is possible to think in truly *ennovative* ways of learning and teaching.

Keywords: elearning, learning management systems, ePortfolios, higher education

THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE IN

Cutting edge means the razor's edge, ie, the first cutting, the part of the knife that first comes into contact with the object to be cut. We have a technological artifact that is operated by a human subject on an object (which is expected not to be human!). The term was originated in the fifties (Dictionary.com, 2009b) in the anglo-saxonic world, in a context of great scientific and technological development (application of scientific knowledge). The term cutting edge applies to advanced technology and the expression is close to the concept of state of the art, the most advanced technology that is known and done, in a given area at any given time. The term is close to the concept of avant-garde which is more applied to cultural and artistic manifestations. The term bidonville also appears in the fifties (Dictionary.com, 2009a) and literally means slum, poor construction of housing in major cities. It means, as reality and concept an unplanned urban organization, subject to the constraints that are put to the people who build it, always according to the most basic needs of survival, that will determine its existence.

Languages are alive and their speakers re-invent the words in accordance with the realities they live. The terms cutting edge and bidonville come at a time of confidence and hope for a future of happiness and harmony for the human species and reflect realities that did not exist. This hope was based largely on the belief that scientific and technological progress would solve all the problems of humanity. But this progress was accompanied by slums and 'next door' extreme poverty, that sixty years later continues to grow and to which we are accustomed and have come to familiar terms, mediated by television, while we sit on a couch or on a table of a café when we read the newspaper. We should, however, remember what we wrote elsewhere:

The comments we just made, either by its content, either by its brevity, could be interpreted as technophobes and neo-luddites. However, they are not. We grew up with technology and we greatly appreciate it: we look forward to the teleporter that will end the anachronistic airports, the same way as we await the automatic writing that will allow direct entry of thought! (Oliveira, 2004, p. 59)

The scientific and technological progress has brought undeniable benefits to our lives and no one dispenses them, neither the rich nor the poor who dream of access to them. All of our well-being is supported by technology. And of all technologies, the most insidious are, of course, information and communication technologies, known as ICT and of which the tic-tac sets the pace of global development.

Between these liquid times in which we live in (Zygmunt Baumann) and the strait-jacket of chronological time, the technological reality is building up at a stunning speed that turns novelty into a fleeting moment in space and time. We are always running, not exactly knowing where to go, if we want to go or get there. Runs the gazelle and runs the lion, as in the African poem written at the entrance of a factory in China (Friedmann, 2006, p. 162):

Event # 6
Offshoring - Running with gazelles, eating with lions.
(...)

*In Africa, every morning a gazelle wakes up.
Knows she must run faster than the fastest lion or be killed.
Every morning a lion wakes up.
Knows he must run faster than the slowest gazelle,
or die of hunger.
It doesn't matter if you're a lion or a gazelle.
When the sun comes up, you better be running.*

As stated by José Saramago (2009), there is a kind of machine that pushes us all in a direction not very clear but certainly a direction of unbridled and uncritical consumption, dominated by a *hegemonic culture* (Antonio Gramsci), based in reproduction mechanism, always imposed, but often hidden. Hints and imagines Saramago the possibility of all of those pushed by the dynamics of oppression making the opposite gesture and pushing the machine back, challenging the prevailing social apparatus. (Louis Althusser).

The Internet is integrated in this machine but, almost paradoxically, the machine is us (Wesch, 2009): we nourished it and teach it every day! Because invariably, despite the misleading promises of technological determinism, some of us participate and others are left out. Technological determinism suggests that technology can solve all problems, that only technology can solve problems. Thus technology gains a kind of soul, abstract, and becomes an entity with human qualities. The problem lies not in technology but in this perception of technology. It's clear that, at the moment, only science and technology can solve the problems that we have created with them.

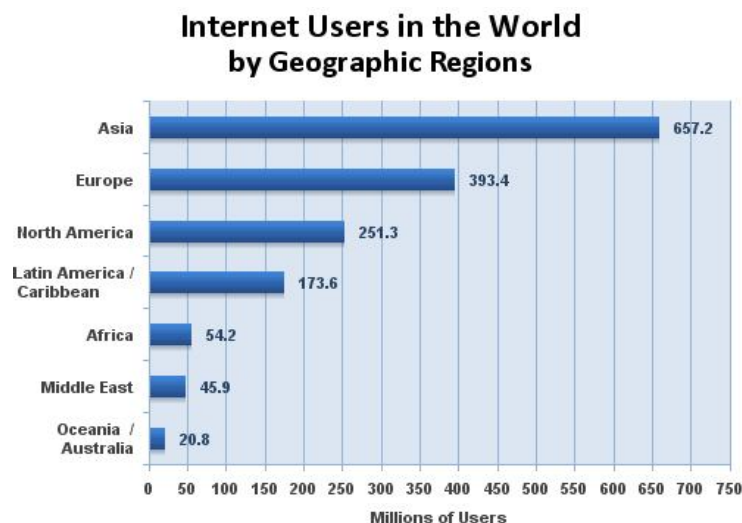
The collective intelligence of Pierre Lévy (1997) has not been for all and the efforts made for equity are weak and diffuse. The world of technology is a mirror of the real world. It has no independent history, as it is the result of the creation of productive forces (Karl Marx).

The Internet realities

The global realities have changed a lot over the last twenty years, especially over the last ten years. This is mainly due to the development of information and communication technologies. The Internet supports globalization, but if the Internet ceased to exist from one day to the other, what would happen to globalization?

According to estimates of 2008, there are 6.710.029.070 people (IWS, 2009) throughout the world; 1.596.270.108 people use the Internet and, at March 31, 2009, its penetration rate was 23.08% (ibid.). Who are these people who use the Internet, how do they use it and where do they live?...

Who are these people and how they use the Internet we do not know. We do know where they live, by geographic regions, and figure 1 illustrates it.



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Estimated Internet users are 1,596,270,108 for March 31, 2009
Copyright © 2009, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Figure 1: Users of Internet throughout the world, by geographical regions (IWS, 2009)

What do these numbers tell us? The obvious is that in Asia there are more people than in other continents and that Europe appears to be the continent where there are better living conditions and therefore easier access to the internet.

However, considering the penetration rate, ie, the number of users relatively to the number of people, the *statistical facts* change substantially, despite their reading being more or less obvious (Figure 2).

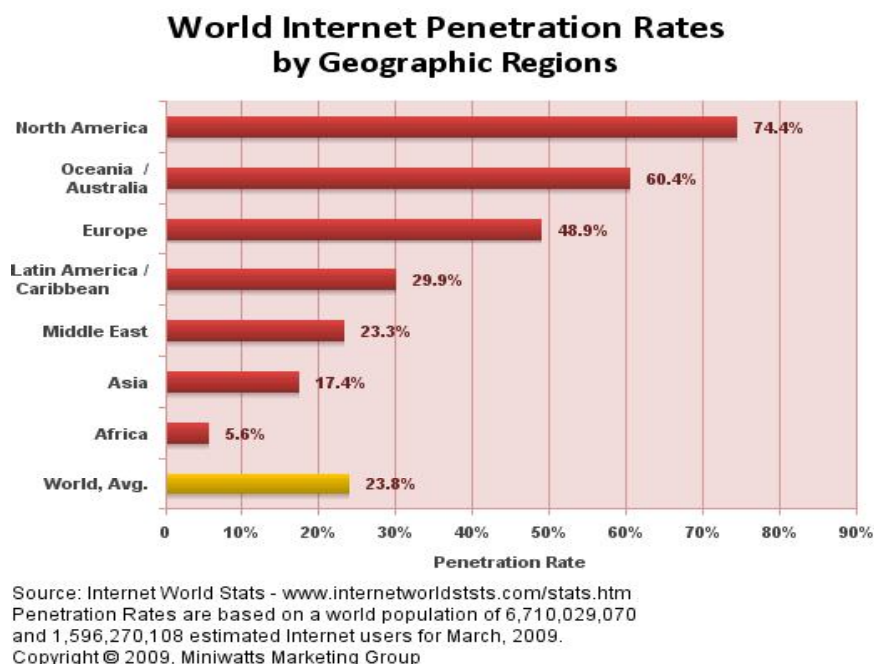


Figure 2: Penetration rate of the Internet worldwide, by geographical regions (IWS, 2009).

The position in the *graded list* of continents changes dramatically and highlights the issue of access to equipments and services, which, as we all know and sometimes seem to forget, reflects the living conditions of populations, the level of consumption and the GDP of the countries that integrate these continents. Please note that the superficial analysis made about these statistics - interpreted by the statistical methodology itself - just looks at the geographic regions and not countries, and within these social groups, social classes.

In summary, access to the Internet is not for everyone. And access is not guaranteed to improve the living conditions of populations, human happiness or better and effective learning, understanding effectiveness in education as learning more and better (know how to better apply what has been learned).

And in Portugal? According to the same source (IWS, 2009), on June 30, 2009 almost half the population used the Internet (see Table 1).

Table 1: Internet use in European counties with a population of around 10 millions of inhabitants (IWS, 2009, selected and adapted)

Country	Population (2009 Estimation)	Internet users, last data	% Population (Penetration)	Users growth (2000-2009)
Belgium	10,414,336	7,006,400	67.3 %	250.3 %
Czech Republic	10,211,904	4,991,300	48.9 %	399.1 %
Greece	10,737,428	4,932,495	45.9 %	392.2 %
Portugal	10,707,924	4,450,800	41.6 %	78.0 %
Sweden	9,059,651	7,295,200	80.5 %	80.2 %

If, in one hand, we still do not know who uses and how they use, in the other hand, we learn that for European countries with a population similar to Portugal (around 10 million), the position in the list is similar to the one of Greece and the Czech Republic, and yet lower. For two of the countries considered more developed (Belgium and Sweden), the distance is considerably amplified, allowing us to ask to what extent the investments made by the Portugal governments in this area over the last twenty years have been appropriate. This, assuming that, internationally and in the context of globalization, the use of internet is considered an indicator and factor of development.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT E-LEARNING IN UNIVERSITIES

The misconceptions about the purposes of the university and its rationale multiplying themselves, discrediting the utopia of a public university devoted to the creation, dissemination and knowledge transfer. On one hand, we continue to stress out and to value the research dimension asked of a university professor, demanding, at the same time, to use their time in distance training, fulfilling tutoring functions, almost impossible to accomplish by the number students to keep up with. Doing distance education requires thinking this modality in accordance and organizing the processes so that it can be done with considerable numbers of students.

On the other hand, the knowledge accumulated by generations of educators is, too often, runned over, and methods and strategies of teaching centered in the student are re-invented. What we see is, unfortunately, and in excess, the educational setbacks: lack of experimental and experiential learning; disciplinary clipping too tight for the realities in which we live in; observance of conservative teaching methods, completely anachronistic, as the lecture (magister dixit) as the unique and credible model of transmission of content.

In the case of institutionalized and conventional e-learning processes, that use learning management platforms (aka LMS, Learning Management Systems), the issues refered above are obliterated, as these platforms mimic a formal educational structure and an obsolete, tight and exclusive disciplinary compartmentalization of knowledge.

About LMS

The LMS reflects the rigid curriculum of training courses that are offered by universities and do not propose nor interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity, or collective building of a program. Each discipline or curricular unit (as the name itself indicates), is sovereign, independent, has a defined territory and borders. For this to be operationalized, these systems can only be cryptic: the teacher needs to request access to their administrative department, the student needs to have payed his/her fee, the interface needs to be decoded. The teacher dictates, a priori, what is done, how it's done and when. From a pedagogical and didactic perspective, the great advantage of these systems, it is said, is control. The students learning control by quantifying their participation: how many times they entered the system, how long they remained there, how many works they delivered, how many participations they left recorded in forums and chats. These elements are transformed in elements of assessment of learning, in addition to the work done and to exams. They do not seem to provide evidence of learning outcomes or knowledge construction.

It is assumed that these platforms replace presential classrooms since they compromise synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. This is accurate, if we think in a context of distance learning scenarios. In situations of presential or mixed teaching (b-learning), these tools lose a lot of their interest, since they will never be better than presential communication. They do present themselves as alternatives to face to face communication (the nearest being videoconference) and even serve as valuable resources when presential communication is not possible. But here we face, as aforesaid, a situation of distance learning, and it's important to distinguish, conceptually, the terms education and teaching — education is a process of training and transformation of the individual, not confined to formal processes of teaching and learning taking place in universities, intended to qualify students in specific skills and knowledge (translated in degrees). Education exists in universities and in society: education serves the personal development of each and everyone of us allowing civility and cordial relationships among individuals. The concept of education can be divided into multiple variants but it is impossible to be confounded with the concept of teaching.

One of the current ideas about the advantages of LMS is that they provide learning opportunities anywhere at any given time. The famous numerical expressions 24/24, 7 / 7 ... These two expressions are, in our opinion, a mistake and a fallacy, that resemble an advertising speech embroiled in a propaganda speech. Try to fill the famous wheel of time, used in training sessions on time management. Draw a circle and imagine that it represents the 24 hours that constitute a day. It will be filled with our occupations, starting with the most basic as sleeping, eating, personal hygiene, dislocations, until we get to professional duties or study ... With the completion of this exercise, it becomes easier to understand both how we use our time and become aware of the reasons that lead to the inevitable acceleration of people's lives. This means that time is not completely elastic.

Being able to learn anytime, anywhere, is a nice idea to tiller! But, in practice, it needs to be accounted for in people's lives. If before we needed time to study, nowadays this time is also needed. The Internet can break barriers of space but not of time. We can study at home, not spending time traveling, but we really need that time available to do so.

The mere possibility of being able to learn in a 24/24, 7 / 7 system does not guarantee that anyone and everyone can study and, in some way, improve their living conditions.

About e-portfolios

The Internet closes in itself a potential of success and impact in the ways of learning and teaching: serves the distribution, communication and intervention / participation, particularly with Web 2.0 technologies (forget about Web 3.0 or 4.0 and the trend of versions for everything), allowing to overcome the difficulties of access, a real participation.

This potential is based on five ideas that intertwine: the idea of fractal, representing what is and is not immediately visible and knowable; serendipity or the ability to make fortunate discoveries, apparently by accident, considered today as a special way of creativity, or one of many techniques for developing the creative potential of an adult, combining patience, intelligence and sense of observation; the theory of chaos, which, in Physics and Mathematics, is the hypothesis that explains the function of complex and dynamic systems - some specific results are caused by the action and interaction of elements in almost random ways - and that tells us that what people think happened randomly is, in fact, a phenomenon that can be represented by equations; storytelling, or the art of telling stories, a form of art inherent to the human language and to the human condition and, finally, the idea of collective intelligence, coined by Pierre Lévy (1997), which is embodied in the statement by McLuhan (1964) concerning the age of electricity, the final phase of the extensions of humankind, the technological simulation of consciousness, in which the creative process of knowledge is collectively and corporately extended to the whole human society.

These five ideas go hand in hand with the concept of e-portfolio, emerging as a learning technology that can and should operate as a personal space of archiving and management of personal information, such as far, around objects, documents and, in a recent proposal - The Internet Manifesto of Subjects (Eifel, 2009) - it is proposed to be structured around subjects / individuals / people.

The portfolio belongs to the individual! An e-portfolio is a documents and file manager of a person, consisting of files (compilation of documents), views (representation of documents) and services (document exploitation). There are no open e-portfolio tools (except Elgg, Eduspaces nowadays) but there are free tools, although commercial, which allows to build them (figure 3). This is part of the business in the Google enterprise. The Google integrated tools allows us to imagine how an e-portfolio can become.

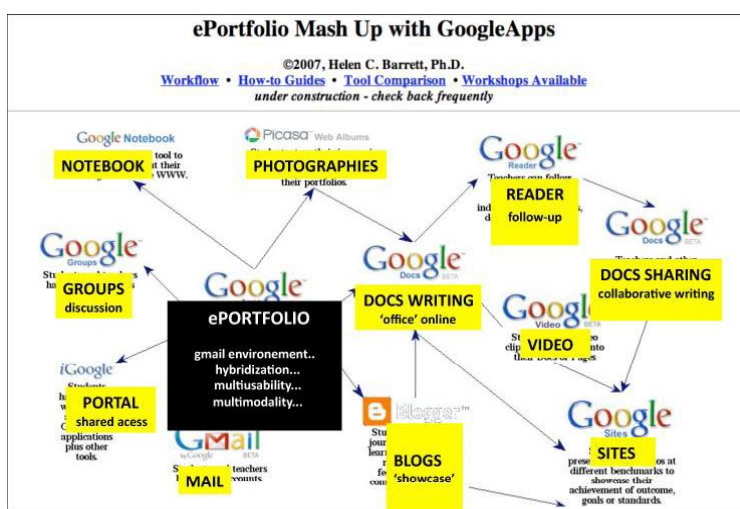


Figure 3: The rationale behind the e-portfolio (adapted from Barrett, 2007 and interpreted)

As we said in another context:

We still need alternative platforms to these learning management platforms. Probably, e-portfolios platforms that can be used - guaranteed and given credibility - by public institutions. (Paraskeva and Oliveira, 2008, p. 14).

We entrust our money to banks and our personal, financial and health data to the state. Universities could well be true custodians of our learning and our collective sharing. Universities gather the expertise, know how and the necessary conditions to do so and to grant us the file and management of our lifelong learning.

The OpenCourseWare

Following this logic, is all the more important the project OpenCourseWare (OCW) of the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, <http://ocw.mit.edu>), which, ten years ago, published openly, the materials used in their courses. In a similar way, it is already possible to access various courses in various areas, in Portuguese (eg <http://www.universia.com.br/mit/>). As a complement, MIT also has a channel on YouTube, which offers videos of lectures, speeches, interviews, discussions, providing access to specialists and theoretical interventions of high quality. It is clearly possible to self learn through these open courses. There will be no human contact, peer and teachers interactions and no certification. That means that these dissemination processes contribute to the prestige of the institutions and do not withdraw its economic gains. Only by attending the institution can one have access to the certification of knowledge and skills.

We believe that this approach really complements the idea of e-portfolio. Effective distribution systems, such as these, repositories of scientific literature and of contents of educational intent, coupled with the possibilities of communication and management of portfolios in a model of social network, are likely to enable better and more advanced processes of teaching and learning.

CLOSING REMARKS

We are the spider! And we weave the web. Provided that the access discrimination is overcome, with social software systems, increasingly embodying the public square of the new generations (Rasco, 2008), we can truly think in really innovative ways — which are different from innovative for its unexpected and self-controlled emergence (see Bonami and Garant, 1996) — of learning and teaching, building a society where everyone can participate.

We must use cutting edge ICT to re-invent these forms and not to perpetuate the bidonville. To reproduce dusty models does not help creativity. The Internet enables us to glimpse new scenarios impossible to imagine before and of anarchist inspiration. Trying to entrap it could never return good outcomes. Cryptic and closed systems generate exclusion, just as in life before the internet and in life with the internet.

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