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HUMANITIES : A European project using a multidimensional learning environement

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1. Introduction : the HUMANITIES EU Project

The HUMANITIES (1) project has developed and consolidated a structure for virtual mobility of students through European universities as a method of providing alternatives to traditional student mobility schemes. It promotes a "hybrid model" of teaching that includes both face-to-face and distance teaching procedures (so-called Demo Seminars) focused on specific themes of study. Based on a gradual and context-based integration of information and communication technologies in University training & teaching, it applies and assesses distance learning. Participants come from European Humanities and Social Sciences faculties from some 26 different Universities, who have accepted to experiment OFDL and collaborate in curriculum innovation, in order to build a meaningful and long-standing teaching, research and organisation effort.

Since 1995, the University of Geneva, through TECFA, has taken part in the study group of Communication Sciences. The 1996-1997 period has been focused on persuasive communication as illustrated by public health campaigns on AIDS prevention. The Swiss partner had two main roles. First, it was responsible for the European Task Force. Secondly, it produced pedagogical material used during the project using an array of technical devices and communication technologies : video and computer conferencing systems, Internet mail and forums, a Web site and a 60 minutes video film on Swiss AIDS Campaigns and communication procedures in TV broadcast.
Finally like all the other partners, Geneva University held four demo-seminars within the framework of Pr. Giordan's courses (School of Psychology and Education Sciences).

We shall first define the meaning and importance of the introduction of the persuasive communication thematic within education sciences teaching. Then we will define the impact of communicational models on the conception and realisation of a filmed course and a pedagogical virtual animation device (2).

2. Education Sciences NTCs and communication theories

Integrating a training module to communication sciences in education sciences teaching can be surprising at first. There are two reasons to this: circumstantial and theoretical.

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There are no faculties or departments teaching courses on communication in the French part of Switzerland. Existing courses are spread out within the curriculum of the faculties of Arts, of sociology, education sciences and even sometimes computer science. TECFA having among its choice of courses some on communication theories, it was chosen to get involved in the European project SIGMA and produced an analysis of the situation of communication teaching in Switzerland (2). Supporting the HUMANITIES project on the experience of SIGMA would therefore seem logical.

Regarding theoretical reasons, these are numerous, sometimes trivial, often under-estimated. They will not be developed here. Here are a few principles to be reminded of. Teaching is a communication act in the strong sense of the term. And it implies, as in all forms of communication, the transmission of a message (the pedagogical content) and the creation of an interpersonal relationship (the pedagogical relationship). It exists in a social area of co-operation which possesses its own institutional and language rules. The pedagogical practise and the disclosure of knowledge are analysed with the tools and methods of semiotics and communication theories as communicational processes. There is also an important body of literature reflecting research centred around the themes of communication and education, communication and pedagogy (3).

Moreover, the pedagogical act, as any communication act, is endowed with an intention and aims at a goal; it favours pragmatical aspects of communication, precisely the modification of the learner's behaviour. Educative communication is thus fundamentally persuasive. We have shown elsewhere that the educative communication is shared between two poles: didactic communication and socio-educative communication (4). It is obvious that the AIDS prevention campaign falls straight into this category of messages.

Finally the NTCs constituting the working environment of the project, are, as all medias, techno-semiotic devices: they are "machines for communicating" (5), technological "arte facts" allowing production of representation and meaning, objectivization, knowledge communication. Besides forms of communication are partly determined by the technical characteristics of these devices. A semiotic approach of NTCs finds here its legitimacy.

3. The conception of filmed course

The conception of this video film "La campagne Stop SIDA- De l'émission à la réception" is based on the results of research carried out notably on mediatized pedagogical communication (6).

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- The mediatic support is not a simple "tool", but plays a determining part in the contents appropriation; this implies working on different dimensions of scriptwriting.
- The spectator is not simply a passive receiver, he also has an active part in the construction of messages; this implies work on setting up conditions for reception susceptible of helping the students to take a critical distance.

This video film, although belonging to the classic kind of filmed courses, presents many characteristics worth developing.

3.1 A polyphonic conception

Three persons, three "voices" take part:

- a prevention and public health specialist and member of the evaluation committee on the Stop AIDS campaign from 1987 to 1991, the Dr Hausser;
- Pierre Dunand Filiol who, by this questions throughout the film, represents the learners point of view ;
- finally myself, as a specialist of mediatized pedagogical communication.

Each of these participants represents a different point of view. The first and third represent specialist points of view, either external (evaluation, context, etc.) or internal (the analysis of the messages themselves). The combination of these two complementary perception on the same ads, on the same empirical objects, progressively builds up a body of common knowledge.

The role of the second participants is also essential. He is the one specifically spoken to by the two other voices. But he is also a true participator in the dialogue, his presence compels the specialists to a real persuasive communication, alive and personalised, avoiding in that way the soliloquised speech where the camera seems to be the only interlocutor. His questions are used as an excuse for clarifying sometimes complex notions, but most of all they offer the viewers a kind of " virtual spokesman", capable of intervening in the enclosed time and space of the film. We try in this way to make up for the feeling of powerless which could seize the distant student when confronted with a medium such as the video which doesn't offer him the possibility of a direct interaction.

3.2 Didactic and narrative structures

The video-film is thus strongly structured, in the same way as a lecture or even a book: the film can be split up into ten parts which can be recognised by subheadings. This thematic cut-out facilitates the comprehension and the positioning of the student-viewer as the document is

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meant to be watched but especially studied. This is for instance the role of subheadings which constitute a kind of table of contents.

The scenario, in opposition to this rigid structure, introduces two short sequences of " spur of the moment reaction " in two ads of the campaign. These sequences structured on a fictional mode bring a change of the enunciation context inspired by the environment of the ads submitted for discussion. The language adopted for this occasion is every day language. There is an attempt to make it easier for the students to take a critical distance. The latter is brought to compare his ad's reception to his professor's, who momentarily has come down from his academic chair and has become again for the occasion an " ordinary citizen": with ordinary language and behaviour.

Let us make it clear that the idea doesn't consist in looking for identification on the part of the student-viewer, but, on the contrary, to offer him a reference point on which he can centre his critical distance taking. This constitutes a help in learning just like the decentralisation mechanisms, inasmuch as the learner must reconstruct his own point of view from those, always different, which are proposed to him.

This device is indeed unequally achieved, but it allows giving back to the specialists voices an interactive dimension, a form of deliberate inter-activity (7)

4. A virtual animation device

Different Web sites have been developed: one European and a few locals ones, one by each university partner. The Swiss site had, among other functions, to provide the followings:

- offer documentation supporting the film produced by TECFA;
- furthering the discussion and research questions linked to the filmed course by means of an electronical forum;
- answering all punctually requests for information from partner universities.

Essentially one can find complementary formation material from :

- copies of posters and extracts of Swiss campaigns STOP AIDS (Office fédéral de la santé publique, 1987 to 1995) classified by themes.
- Some accompanying material for the filmed course: credit titles and links between the interveners and the partners, the main articulation of the film, the English translation of the conversations; the main semiopragmatic concepts and also cross-references to the reference texts or to film extracts.
- An electronical forum aiming at going deeper in the research themes linked to the analysis of the film and its contents.

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The whole of this really constitutes an environment of documentary support, completing in a different way the information given by the film: a disciplinary structured information and a set of inter-individual or collective interactions between pairs. Besides, these two aspects have been much appreciated by the participants

Finally, TECFA has offered an interaction model for video-conferences and demo-seminars, which was then adopted by the Thematic Study Group of literature. The simple principle consists in structuring the interventions on a thematic basis (and no longer on a geographical one) from a synthesis of interrogations and pre-treated questions in every local centre. The preparation work is certainly more important but the device's efficiency gains from it, as the degree of satisfaction of the entire European participants showed.

5. Conclusions

Despite the numerous technical and organisational difficulties, HUMANITIES can be considered as a success:

- Within the education sciences Faculty, HUMANITIES succeeded in creating an interest in the techniques and methods of the OFDL and also for the communication theories.
- The film is an illustration of theoretical principles developed from the analysis of AIDS prevention ads.
- The virtual animation device proposed corresponds to the classical definition of a multi-media device: several media converge towards common objectives, from strategies and scenarios which respect the technosemiotics characteristics of each of one.

References and notes

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(2) MacCluskey Alan (1995*), La formation universitaire en Science de la Communication. Projet Européen Sigma*. Rapport suisse, TECFA/OFES, mai. Sous la direction scientifique de D. Peraya.

(3) *Communication Education*, par exemple.

(4) Peraya D. (1993) Les formes de communication pédagogique médiatisée : le socio-éducatif et le didactique, *Journal de l'enseignement primaire*, n ° 44, mai/juin 1993, 24-28. et Peraya D

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