Mailbox, Or The Importance Of Being In Quest

An ethnographic study of information and communication technologies in European schools

> *"When we talk about computers in education, we should not talk about a machine* having *an effect. We should be talking about the opportunity offered us, by this computer presence, to rethink what learning is all about, to rethink education". (*Seymour Papert)

Where do we come from and where are we going?

The idea behind MAILBOX was initially the product of two people who extensively attended the European arena of R&D in communication and information technologies in school environments. These two people were often puzzled and somehow disappointed with the dominant approach, which seemed to be largely inspired by a lot of **wishful thinking supported by implicitly prescriptive questions**. These questions could not but lead to pre-formatted answers ("yes, by using computers, learning is more effective"; "certainly, computers make learning cost-effective"; "space and time barriers are overcome"; "wider access = extended democracy"... Or the contrary, it does not matter).

We felt we could not be alone in our uneasiness in front of this awkward research: a research so miraculous, that it could produce results even before any implementation in real settings had taken place. We formed a European team, grouping people from different backgrounds: anthropology, psychology, economics, political sciences. The challenge was clear: to come out of the deadlock that self-referential approaches had generated and to open a breach in the consensus developed around computers and schools, be it glorification or demonization. The task was difficult: to formulate new questions which would allow to have a better understanding on the short and long term dynamics implied by the use of ICT in specific school environments and in specific cultural contexts. We felt that the people concerned, the teachers and the children, should not be excluded from the process negotiating the priorities in the domain. School has been for too long an abstract concept, a flag waved for opportunistic reasons, a misconceived world.

How are we going there?

We felt that it was time for the implicitly prescriptive questions to leave the floor to an **explicitly descriptive approach**. Only an ethnographic method could bring some fresh air to the stagnating domain: going to the field, observing the activities and the interactions taking place, participating to them, reporting them, eliciting the subjective perspective of the observer, trying to restore the liveliness of the real context. Almost a literary work. And then, sharing the data in our composite, multi-cultural and multi-national partnership, in spite of the difficulties derived from comparing culturally different settings observed by "indigenous" researchers.

So, finally, where are we going?

There are a few questions we would like to share with the audience. To us, they seem to have a relevance for the decision-making platform concerning ICT in school. These questions presuppose the awareness that school is first and foremost a place of socialisation and that there are learning achievements that transcend the explicit curriculum. In school, children learn not only to read, write, count. They not only learn practical skills for the labour market, as a new trend would like to stress. They also learn how to become individuals and members of society, they learn behaviours, they learn values. This is what we call **implicit learning** (and what John Dewey called collateral learning). Do technologies affect this latent process? And, if so how? That was the starting point of our investigation. It led us into new vistas, and new challenges for the field: the relationship of the child with the self and others; learning "generating schemes of practices", as opposed to learning contents; the status of error and uncertainty; the question of trust between teachers and children; the status of pleasure and play in school; the functions of ritual in electronic communication; the relationship between magic and real; and, finally, the power relations between actors in school.

Some examples of common assumptions and their confutation

My presentation will focus on two statements commonly raised when computers in school are at stake and on the way our observations can change the perspective. Our data show that the way these assumptions were formulated actually concealed the essence of the experience and the complexity underlying it:

Common place 1

E-mail correspondence is good for learning foreign languages and intercultural communication.

Common place 2

Teachers are the main vectors of the resistance to change and therefore to computer implementation in schools. They need to be trained technologically in order to become willing supporters of change.

These common assumptions share a vision of the computer in school as the *primum movens* of the pedagogical and organisational changes taking place. That is: you put a computer in a classroom and someone able to operate it and everything will change: pupils will become motivated, parents will become partners, knowledge will circulate, intercultural communication will flow, social differences will be abolished... Or, the symmetrical belief: computers will bring isolation, moral turpitude, disturb family relations, upset the balance of powers between teachers and pupils...

To conclude

What we see here at work is what we might call an essentialist vision of the computer: it is as if the computer had magical properties in itself, either divine or satanic. The computer thus enters the realm of the supernatural and is best attended by priests in specific temples.

Needless to say, our observations make us doubt of the intrinsic qualities of computers. We are prone to suggest what we might call a contextualist conception of computers in education: in order to understand what computers are all about, we need to look at them in the very many contexts of their very many uses. Computers are never by themselves: they are always to be seen in relationship not only with the user they face, but also within their social, organisational and ideological settings. To illustrate with a very basic example: when computers are locked up in a special room and require either a permit or an authorised supervisor to be accessed, the relationship that students will entertain with them (and with their teacher, and with the school, and with their peers, and with the adults' world, and with the "forbidden", and...) will most probably be very different from those which can be developed when they are freely accessible.

In our research, we did not try so much to assess the effects of the introduction of computers into schools, than we were observing the actual usage and gratification allowed by computers. It happens that most present day usage of computers in schools are far ahead of the intellectualised questions we ask about them. There is a gap between the fluid experiences run by trials and errors in schools across Europe today and the usual theoretical and pragmatic questions addressed to computers in school. The gap is so big that only a major leap in conceptual imagination combined with a very focused (and modest) empirical attitude will allow us to understand the game.