

# PHILOSOPHY AND THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY AND A CLARIFICATION IN THE FORMATION OF CRITICAL THINKING AND AN ARGUMENT FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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The advances in mass media, along with the great technological advances, are the cause for an urgent call to reflect on education. The challenge is very clear: to make a place for technology within the educational instruction and activities and moral teachings, without losing sight of the horizon of integral formation within life itself. This **challenge** ought to be assumed as a part of our Christian commitment and catholic beliefs. Today our students handle the computer with an impressive agility and their manner of relating to one another is changing. The 'Instant Messenger' (IM) and the 'Chat Room' have revolutionized the interpersonal relationship systems and how we meet and get to know one another. The challenge is not virtual, it is real. This critique goes from the use of language in virtual reality to the improper use of academic information. These are **challenges** to which we must be alert, and remain wide-awake, without turning away from the virtual classroom with our students, breaking the traditional paradigm, "the block" structure of a classroom that only encases. At a "matrix" level there is a model that we ought to study and to reflect on from an educational stance.

## 1. ANTECEDENTS AND JUSTIFICATION

The project has been developed in two areas of a virtual character: the virtual classroom through the *moodle* platform, and, the use of Cmaps Tools. I first became acquainted with these two technological, didactic elements each of a pedagogical nature at the University of St. Bonaventure. When I arrived at La Enseñanza, I was surprised that the school had the *Moodle* platform. I was interested in using it with the valuable help of the head professor Mélida Casas, in the Systems department. At the same time, I was beginning to detect that the students spent a long time in chatting and using Instant Messenger. Thus, I exchanged emails in order to converse with them. I realized that the way they wrote was impoverished in the incorrect use and misuse of the language were very strong, to the point in which things they no longer addressed one another face to face. They found web sites on which to place insults toward others by means of virtual reality. This is the opportunity, this is the point, clearly, if they spend so much time in front of the computer, well we have to occupy them in what they like. This is how I began to work in forums and chats with an academic and intellectual tone. It was not that easy (in the methodology and the activities it will be clarified), because of the reading and writing required. If they fail to fulfill them, it will automatically show in their participation in the forum or the chat room. But my discipline does not allow me to make a project without justification. I could easily have stayed in the form, but here what matters is the foundation, the base, which is the *philosophy of the encounter*, without which, the project can be turned into a novelty more than into a strategy for the formation of critical thinking and a debate for social transformation.

Authors like Buber, Levinás, Jesús Martín Barbero and Manuel Castells give me the elements to establish a work with philosophical rigor. I am not going to convey to you the complete document of philosophical background, but I want to place an emphasis on the importance of the relational dimension of the human being, who is itself affected by the mass media and the uncontrollable evolution of tic's."

Technology is not worth anything **without education** nor cultural and educational development for the country. It serves as a marketplace for the multinationals, but it does not serve the people. The combination necessary at this moment so as not to be excluded from the world is **information - knowledge - technology**. Unfortunately few can develop these elements, which has extended the breach between the poor zones and the richest of the world ". (Castells)

These expositions of Castells summarize all the justification of the project, but I insist on the importance of knowing the proposed philosophy of the encounter in order to understand the fundamental communication focus of the project in mention.

## **2. DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE**

### **▪ General mission:**

To use the technological means that allow the didactic creativity with a pedagogical depth in the teaching of philosophy. In order to promote the formation of critical thinking and debate in the social transformation, by means of the use of the platform of virtual classrooms and the structuring of thought by means of the use of Cmaps.

### **▪ Target Population:**

The project is carried out with the students of Tenth and Eleventh grade in the School of Education - Bogota

### **▪ Specific Objective:**

- 1 To encourage the reading of academic books and to recapture the custom of 'night table reading'.
- 2 To establish guidelines for the structuring of academic readings by means of parallelograms, maps conceptual, "mentefactos" and maps of ideas.
- 3 To stimulate the writing of ideas with a theoretical foundation by means of tests and the virtual forum.
- 4 To demand the good use of language in virtual media.
- 5 To go to external evaluations on the process of the project.

### **▪ Activities:**

The virtual classroom is a developmental system that takes place through the technologies of information (TIC'S). It is part of what we could call a teaching method for virtual learning. Once the objectives of the virtual classroom are known, (the tools that it offers and knowing how to handle them as an educator), we continued- with the technical support from the Systems Department- in the elaboration of the philosophy course, in which the following activities were implemented:

#### **A. QUESTIONNAIRE**

This virtual classroom tool allows us to evaluate the contents in a concrete and precise and specific form using multiple choice questions, pairs, true or false, and sentence completion. The questionnaire is an evaluation of contents and of textual interpretation. The students can see their results when they finish it and see the areas in which they failed. The questionnaire is the first tool used with the students. In spite of the difficulties found in terms of the technical requirements, it can be carried out. These questionnaires have been carried out in hours other than the regular class schedule, in such a way that it requires the teacher's help via the Internet. We will soon see the implications of this in the section dedicated to evaluation.

#### **B. FORUM**

It is the tool that allows us to really approach the philosophical exercise, because in it a subject for discussion is considered and all are contributing to the thoughts that each student is formulating.

It is thus that the forum is a form of co-evaluation, of cooperative formation. In the beginning the handling of the forum was difficult, since the use of the language had suffered because of the culture of the chat room in terms of spelling, grammar and the fundamental essence of our Castilian language. In order to participate in the forum the students must make an analytical reading of a text, select texts and from the formulation of the text, make the respective critique. Thus the forum is what the students most participate in, especially when the subject matter is considered of personal, national or civil interest. One advances little by little towards a more real philosophical formation because certain autonomy is being identified in the accomplishment of the activities. This takes place in such a way that at the heart of this project is the personal structuring and inter- structuring of Louis Not.

Forums such as *"from dogmatism to criticism in the Colombian policy"* and *"why are the ideals and the principles sold?"* allow us to see that the critical formation from the virtual classroom is possible, efficient and effective, mainly when real subjects of a national and political tone are touched upon. These forums have allowed the themes of the forums and chats to have a greater political and ethical character, giving a philosophical emphasis to all.

### **C. CHAT**

The Chat that comes from the system of the virtual classrooms is of a reflective character, as in the forum it was hard work to rescue the spelling, grammar and richness of our language when writing. It has not been easy, because the abbreviations and synthesized words are not part of a serious philosophical formation leading towards acquiring a critical proactive thinking that is faced with the challenges of our society. In the Chat we found how the students mistreated others, how they were intolerant toward the ideas of some of their companions, leading us to reframe the system and propose coming together in the classroom to deal with potential arguments and criticism.

The Chat "of what we have had our doubts", based on Descartes, permits us to work with the skeptical criticism of today's youth. It gave us key elements for understanding the attitudes of some students when faced with norms, to view of life and even, their own death.

### **D. TASKS AND WORKSHOPS**

Through the use of this tool our objective is to help the student deepen in their thematic views. Here we try to form them in responsibility, autonomy and interest in their academic work. This means that the workshops and the homework are an excuse to form them in the self-discipline of work. But something basic has to change in the manner in which the homework and workshops are graded. Usually a task and a workshop is signed by the professor, in some cases containing question marks, or a red spot that seems to ask a question. Thus, in the homework turned in through email, in addition to a qualitative grade that should be accompanied with a congratulatory note is this is the due, or giving a suggestion or calling their attention to some point, whatever the case requires, should be included. This has been an arduous task, but I have seen in the last three years how the students have reacted positively to the matter because they really feel evaluated.

#### **■ Methodology**

##### **1. Philosophical Readings**

Following the teacher's explanation, the students remain with a few books from the authors they are working with in philosophy. This reading must be analytical and from a book in hard copy. Each student must select the respective citations, underline phrases for emphasis, and look up

terminology. Soon the questions are shared and a debate for the virtual forum is ready.

## **2. Virtual Forum**

In order to participate in the forum, the subject being in accord with the students, since it must start off from an existential need with a philosophical character, each student develops their commentary beginning with a quote selected by them; and what each student raises for discussion is commented upon by their companions. The professor evaluates the commentaries, not so much by what is written, but by the handling of the language, the coherence and cohesion of ideas, spelling etc....

### **▪ Time and duration of the experience:**

The project has been ongoing for three years, with hopes that little by little it will be improved and we can create a philosophical network, at least in the Company Mary schools in Colombia.

### **▪ Means of Financing:**

The project has been made possible through the support of the Directors of the School, with their concern to *educate always in a new way*, with their desire to invest in technology and to provide the best pedagogical and didactic tools, as well as servers and other computer science implements. In addition I did not have Internet access in the house, so I was called upon to finance my hours in Internet Cafés near my house.

## **6. EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIENCE:**

### **Outstanding Aspects:**

- 1 It is important to refer to the pro-active and positive attitude of the students with the project. It caught my attention as to how they read their academic texts and how they have been devoted to their personal reading and of their night reading.
- 2 The unconditional attitude and the confidence of the School directors.
- 3 To be recognized with two prizes: a.) Best Project, at a national level that promotes reading. Granted by *the Reading Foundation* b.) Best Teacher of the country in the Teacher Competition, 2006.

Within the philosophical work we have seen an improvement in criticism, debate of ideas, a growth in the work of responsible self-discipline, as well as improving writing skills in the forum and Chat Room. It is important to remember that at a pedagogical level the strategy has allowed them to develop a critical-reflective thought from the connotations of significant learning. Also as in the construction of ideas and speech, this being a reflection of philosophical thought with a high level of degree.

On the other hand, at the institutional level all the areas of knowledge have entered into the dynamics, encouraged by the teachers, by the interest they have seen in the students in the work of learning in philosophy.

This being a project that is in the making, this year we begin an evaluation to see the impact on the alumni, from those who have received excellent commentaries by not crashing with the virtual classrooms system in their university education.

At the moment we have begun to make connections at a national level, specifically with Company of Mary schools. This is in process and being managed, in such a way that hopefully in a year, we will have a philosophical network of the Company of Mary at the International level.

The strategy ascertains that a serious reflection is made with the triad: pedagogy-philosophy-virtual classroom. Thus didactic strategies have been implemented that allow the student to use the tools that computer science technology offers for the formation in responsibility, independence, self-discipline. This takes place with a view to establish a work that goes beyond the borders of inter-locution, auto-structuring and inter-structuring where evaluation is cultivated like a system triad of auto, self, and co-evaluation, guaranteeing a formation in critical thinking and a philosophy-based debate.

#### **4. Difficulties:**

A project is like a child: the joy of seeing it born, the pleasure of seeing it grow, the crisis of not being able to understand it and the fear of losing it. The greatest difficulty is not to let it become routine and monotonous because it is easy to implement a virtual education but this does not replace the relational education with its respective values. It has not been easy to work with language in virtual reality. That is a challenge that still is in a process of assimilation.

The implementation of the project brought resistance on the part of some students in the beginning, the reason being that we had achieved a level of awareness with an emphasis on the importance of knowing how to use time with autonomy, with a view to having a superior education, in such manner that it becomes clear in the personal work. It is thus, that little by little, we began in the school, with the technical support of the professors of systems, with those who were in common agreement developed the opportunities within the school schedule, the use of the virtual classroom and little by little it came about, becoming as a tool to promote the critical, cooperative and argumentative thought in the students. It brought difficulties in that some students did not have Internet access in their homes. This was another reason why the students had to rely on an adaptable school schedule. Today, this has been resolved, but there is another problem more closely related to the responsibility and autonomy of the students. This situation means that, at all times, my work as an educator is not static but dynamic in forming argumentative and critical thinking in the student with the objective of forming leaders with ideals for social transformation.

#### **5. Learnings for other groups:**

- Technology does not erase pedagogy and didactic.
- TIC's must be implemented in the pedagogy.
- Philosophy is not so boring, it is even virtual.
- Education, knowledge and technology go hand in hand.

#### **6. Other Aspects to Share:**

The national recognition that we have received states that the charism of Santa Jeanne de Lestonnac is effective, we are committed to it, but at the same time it encourages us to continue implementing educational projects.

In the activities and tools that have been used in the virtual classroom in this project what needed the greatest amount of change was the concept and the form of evaluation; that is to say, it is not possible to evaluate with a simple questionnaire. The virtual classroom indeed makes effective, efficient and the processes of personal, auto, and co-evaluation in the education-learning process possible; learning-education process. Emphasis is on the second because by means of this system, especially in the forum and the Chat room, there are many lessons that one leaves to the students

to confront with the vision of existence, of national and world-wide reality. Nothing is fixed in this project, each time it is necessary to sit and to think about the strategic forms in which the quality in the critical, argumentative formation is obtained with a spirit of leadership and social transformation.

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

The system of the virtual classroom changed my traditional form of teaching philosophy, causing my spirit of educational-researcher to be concerned about the pedagogical and didactic practice of the philosophical task faced with the challenges that are raised by the technology of information and their influence in the education-learning process. What has been of vital importance in implementing the project has been the support of the Principal, Mother Beatriz Jáuregui, the Vice Principal, Mother Maria del Carmen Romero, the Academic Coordinator Martín Angel, professor of systems, Mérida Casas, who have encouraged me to lead the process, as well as the fact that I have been able to collaborate in the training of colleagues as opposed to the handling of the virtual classroom and its pedagogical implications.

It is important to repeat that the virtual classroom system breaks the classic structures of the evaluation process and the way that we teach the capacity to be critical thinkers. This strategy responds to the need to add the computer science technologies and their influence in the education-learning process, from the philosophical formation.

The objective of implementing and combining pedagogically and didactically the virtual classroom with philosophy, education and technology, from a new vision of a spirit of social transformation is the critical argument. Computer science technology leans towards quality in such formation, excellence in the capacity for analysis of real problems at a personal, social, national and international level with a view to responding to the challenges of society in ethical, political, anthropological contexts... within a paradigm of competitiveness, globalization and opening doors for a TLC demands of us educators to place an emphasis in the formation of critical persons with ideals, so that they can truly achieve social transformation.

The project is useful and meaningful. This is clearly evident in the process that took place for our participation in "To Share", in granting the title of Illustrious Teacher and to be found outstanding by the Foundation for Reading as the best project that promotes reading at national level. This causes the break with skepticism regarding our work as educators and evangelizers.

### **SUGGESTIONS:**

To implement the project at the level of Company of Mary schools establishing the Network of Philosophy Montaigne Lestonnac.