NOVA UNAE. A transmedia project to promote learning in the digital era

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ABSTRACT: The project NOVA UNAE of the National University of Education of Ecuador (UNAE), which we present in this paper, helps teachers to access educational, audiovisual, and transmedia content –useful to them for their own education, as well as to use with their students– through technology and mass media, so that the teachers update their pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge but also practice their skills of using technology and audiovisual material in class. We maintain that this is crucial in times in which digital alphabetization is key for processes of building citizenship.

KEYWORDS: Communication, teaching training, educational technology.

For better or for worse, we irreversibly live in a digital era. Nowadays, it is necessary for teachers to integrate in their classes the new tools and resources that mass media and educational technologies offer, in order to better create learning environments that can be adapted to different learning rythms, as well as to new dynamics and habits of consumption and processing of information that characterize the contemporary world. The term "digital alphabetization" was coined, indeed, both to show the need for students to aquire competencies of critically discerning among the infinite amount of content in the global village and to emphasiz the crucial importance of subjects being able to not only consume but to produce and distribute their own content.

Sadly, the use of technology in general, as well as of audiovisual resources in particular, is a pending business of education in Ecuador. Likewise, the aquisition of the pertinent competencies to critically engage with audiovisual productions is, in a word, absent from our current educational system. In fact, in a 2015 nation–wide study on teaching performance and use of educational technology and audiovisual materials in class (conducted in urban zones and with a sample error of 3.5%), the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education found out that:

- 86% of teachers have Internet service at home.

- 77% of teachers have a Facebook account; 49%, a Google Plus account; and 20% of them, a Twitter account.

- Only 24% of teachers constantly guide their students on television programs that are more convenient to them.

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– Only 17% of teachers constantly talk to their students about television shows, and 41% does that sometimes.

– 46% of teachers think that audiovisual resources are very useful for teaching.

– 43% of teachers frequently show videos in class (either all the time or sometimes).

– Although most teachers say that they have assigned the viewing of a given television show for homework, this practice is not frequent. Only 8% of them declared that they did this all the time, and 34% said they did it sometimes. (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Thus, we can see that the regular teacher in Ecuador knows that it is important to use digital tools in class yet does not use them. A plausible inference, then, is that teachers may be willing to use them, but do not know how to do it and maybe are even afraid to do it. Hence, it is imperative to motivate them and to empower them to actually use these resources.

Based on the principle of "learning by doing," which guides our work at the National University of Education (UNAE), we believe that the best way to learn to use media, educational technologies and audiovisual resources in class is, precisely, to actually use them. Moreover, we think that teachers should see qualified teaching trainers modeling their use and showing, in practice, their absolute centrality in contemporary learning processes, so that they can also start to integrate them in their own daily activities (UNAE, 2016).

The issue is of utmost importance. The power of audiovisual content in digital societies plays an essential role in learning processes and, furthermore, in the construction of citizenship, since it spreads, sets down, and anchors messages in social subjects, so that those messages turn into internalized reality. Thus, the transmission of information in audiovisual formats that bring significant cultural experiences to teachers (in order for them to acknowledge the value of those practices, to aquire the codes for their deciphering, and to develop a taste –or even a need– for them) is constitutive not only of learning but, even more decisively, of democracy and peace culture (Gros & Contreras, 2006).

Aiming at developing these competencies in Ecuadorian teachers, UNAE has created NOVA UNAE, a multimedia project in which audiovisual content and technological platforms of information and knowledge will be used to strengthen learning processes and teaching training. Indeed, we want to reach a majority of the country's teachers through virtual and mixed courses based on transmedia materials that help them update their knowledge on pedagogical and disciplinary topics. Meanwhile, these courses are designed for their participants to access the full potential of educational resources in the digital era, too, which is achieved through the practice of using educational technology and audiovisual materials itself.

NOVA UNAE has recently come out from planning stage and into the first pilot, which was filmed in November 2018. This pilot consists of an English course for language teachers that has the goal of promoting some of the most current active strategies to teach the productive, receptive, and group–managing skills that are needed in learning processes of a foreign language. If we agree on the principle that the students are the protagonists of their own learning, even in and especially in classes of English as a foreign language, then we can conclude that the teacher must be a guide who helps students get to their learning goals through the right activities (Overby, 2011). That is why teachers have to understand their students' realities and, based on that, choose the best learning methods. These contemporary realities prominently include, in our digital era, mass media and audiovisual content. Hence, the permanent development of new educational technologies forces teachers to constantly update both their ways of teaching and their thinking, so that they can approach learning

processes through current topics that are attractive to progressively younger student populations (Avalos, 2011). As a consequence, training in new methodologies, and especially in the use of teaching technologies for English classes, becomes fundamental. Furthermore, the virtual character of the training, along with its emphasis on audiovisual materials that are broadcasted through conventional media (television, for example) and on the Internet allows teachers who live far away from the big, urban areas of the country, or who do not have enough resources (time, money, etc.) to travel, to participate in processes of training, to be formed, and, in the end, to become integrated to the realities of the digital era.

This first pilot of NOVA UNAE is just the initial step of an ambitious project, then, which pretends to substantially contribute to the improvement of teaching competencies in our country. It can also be a first approach to the ideas of the famous entrepreneur and educator, Sal Khan, who maintains that technology, far from operating independently from or even beyond subjects, actually creates conditions that allow humans to be more human. If we take advantage of the potential of media and of audiovisual content for education without ignoring inclusiveness in all possible aspects of the educational processes, we think that projects like NOVA UNAE can help us to achieve just that: for us to be more human.

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