Looking and Not Seeing the Difference: An intercultural media education experience in Chile

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Abstract

The paper deals with the problem of adolescent intercultural encounters. It discusses the results of a study conducted in digital storytelling workshops attended by urban and rural, indigenous and non-indigenous, students from two regions of Chile. It analyzes, with a dialogic and ethnographic approach, the processes and products created by the adolescents. Results reveal that adolescents take a position that challenges the adult world. In this intercultural encounter, the difference is not confirmed for some participants, whereas for others, who do identify differentiating traits, ethnic characteristics are not visible and remain absent from their digital creations.

Keywords: Young people; intercultural relationship; media education; digital storytelling; dialogism

1. Introduction

Chile has declared itself a multicultural and multiethnic country (MIDEPLAN – CONADI – Programa Orígenes, 2008; Ley Indígena N°19.253). According to the 2011 National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey [Encuesta de Caracterización Socioeconómica Nacional 2011], 8.1\% of the Chilean population is indigenous, and most live in urban areas. The Mapuche people constitute the largest portion of this group. They are mostly present in the South of the country, especially in the Araucanía region, where 32\% of the population is indigenous (MIDEPLAN, 2011). The situation of the indigenous population of Chile, like in most Latin American countries, is characterized by social and economic inequality, high poverty and work precariousness rates, and low rates of schooling and access to goods and services (Bello & Rangel, 2000 and Winkler, 2004).
Interculturality in Chile is a subject that has historically generated tension and challenges for our society, especially with respect to the Mapuche people. In the case of adolescents, two studies conducted by UNICEF (2004 and 2007) show that the highest degree of prejudice against indigenous peoples is observed among the youngest groups. Twenty-seven percent of individuals aged 12-13 display a prejudiced view of this part of the population. Lower-SES students are the most discriminatory against and less tolerant of difference in general.

Chile's Bilingual Intercultural Education policy, implemented in the late twentieth century, has focused on intervening public primary schools located in rural Indigenous Development zones and in urban areas with large indigenous population percentages. It has emphasized the revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures in Chile by adding the subject Indigenous Language to the school curriculum (compulsory for schools located in zones with large indigenous populations) and by bringing indigenous cultural consultants to schools (Ministerio de Educación, 2011). Interculturality in schools, although listed as a strategy in its stated mission, has not translated into a clear, systematic, or strategic plan that can educate students with regard to the relationship between the indigenous peoples and Chileans.

Media production in schools is regarded as a good way to promote more effective and complex educational practices (Buckingham, 2007) because it allows students to assume a more active role in learning, while the teacher acts as a promoter and collaborator for this learning (Penklns, 2011; Sadik, 2008). Research about media production and education has shown important effects upon children and young people involved in educative activities (Peppler & Kafai, 2007; Erstad, Gilje & de Lange, 2007), especially upon their empowerment and participation. Storytelling has been used as a specific strategy to link knowledge about the narrative of media with the development of critical and reflexive perspectives in students.

Such educational experiences are widespread neither in Chilean nor in Latin American schools. A further evolution of this approach can be observed in informal education initiatives, usually linked to popular education and community projects. There is an assumption that experiences of this kind would have good results regardless of their cultural and social contexts, and regardless of participating groups and individuals. In this regard, Buckingham proposes (2009) that there is a naïve conception of the power and implications that “creative” visual methods have in education and in research with children and young people.

In this paper we discuss the results of an action-research project that carried out multimedia workshops to promote digital storytelling in primary public schools from low-income areas in Chile. The project was permeated by concerns about the uneasy relationships among media education, young people, and intercultural relationships in schools. In particular, we present the work undertaken with urban and rural, indigenous and non-indigenous, students from two Chilean cities: Santiago (the capital) and Villarrica, in the Araucanía region. We reflect on digital creations and interactions during the working process. One of the main assumptions at the beginning of this study was that there would be differences between workshops due to cultural diversity. The goal of the paper is to discuss how these students dealt with identity representation in their digital creations, and how they negotiated the ethnic-cultural background in their texts and creative processes.

The theoretical perspective used belongs to a line of research on media education that considers adolescents as creators of culture, and brings up the importance of understanding this field in its multidimensional form, not only at the pedagogical or technological levels (Braggs & Buckingham, 2008; Buckingham, 2009; Willet, 2009; Valdivia, 2012). More specifically, we employ a sociocultural approach (Vigotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991) to understand these cultural and educational phenomena. Like all human activity, adolescents’ creations are socially mediated, historically conditioned, and are therefore the result of communicative processes.

We take a dialogical perspective (Bakhtin, 2002; Voloshinov, 1992) to deal with discursive phenomena, considering the responsive nature of language and human existence, and the relevance of alterity in the construction of identity. From this point of view, a subjective position is always partial, and, therefore, cannot be isolated: it is always responding to other positions. In such a way, the creative processes and the media production of young people can be understood as subjectivity practices and forms of expression about themselves in relation to their otherness. Dialogism makes it possible to rethink the relationships of meaning from the point of view of construction with others and with the social, cultural, and historical context; for that reason, this is especially valuable in the domain of intercultural education.
2. Method

The research methodology combined an ethnographic approach with action research. The project involved several forms and moments. First, we carried out an ethnographic study of the life of the school, focused on interaction dynamics among teachers and students, and among students; the role and uses of digital technologies and media; and the rules and norms in pedagogical practices and in socialization and sociability practices. Then, we organized a multimedia workshop to promote digital storytelling among young students and to generate a setting that could allow us to investigate their media production practices. Workshops were offered as an after-school activity.

2.1. Participants

The workshops were implemented in two public primary schools, one located in a low-income area of the Santiago, capital of the country, and another in Villarrica, a small city in the Araucanía region, in the south of the country. The latter is attended by students from the city and from neighboring rural areas, a large percentage of who are children and adolescents of Mapuche descent.

On average, 15 adolescents aged 12-15 participated in each workshop, with an almost equal number of females and males. The facilitation team was formed by a researcher and a teacher or an administrator of the school's media and technological laboratories.

Students displayed varying levels of technological expertise: while a few had email and fotolog accounts, used online chat, and had visited the most popular music and video websites, the rest signed up and opened their email accounts for the first time during the workshop. Two features were shared by all the young participants: watching TV as the main activity after school and a lack of Internet access at home, so that their online activity was sporadic and occurred only at school or to a lesser extent in Internet cafes. This explains the great interest aroused among students in the workshop.

2.2. The educational component of media production

As initial activities, we attempted to make students feel familiar with different technological tools used in the workshop: a specially created website, digital photo cameras, and video editing software. Each student had to take some photos of him or herself as a way to introduce themselves. This enabled us to obtain a more intimate view of the inner world of each student and their family contexts. During a later stage, groups of two or three students were set up. Each group created a short video to introduce themselves. This activity had three aims: to promote team spirit among teenagers, to teach them how to use the digital video editor, an important tool for storytelling, and to produce some video presentations where students of both schools could know young people from another city. This stage ended with a plenary session in which students talked about videos with students from other schools.

During the third stage, each group worked on the creation of digital stories. This central activity seemed to be quite challenging for students since it required a lot of organization and coordination in groups. Only three conditions were given to creators: to use fiction as a narrative form; to stay under the time limit (three minutes); and to refrain from attacking or insulting others. Like in the second stage, this activity ended with a session in which students watched all the video stories created by the participants. In addition, their learning as individuals and in groups during the workshop was evaluated.

2.3. Research Materials

A number of materials were produced during the study. In order to organize and analyze them, we proposed two great dimensions: creative process and creations. The materials collected in order to analyze the first dimension were: field notes, photos, maps, audio recordings of different interactions among groups, and interviews with adults and students. The material considered within the second dimension consisted of ten digital stories.
2.4. Analysis of materials

Regarding the creative process, the ethnographic analysis allowed for the reconstruction of the workshop’s history and the identification of the most relevant and significant aspects of process. Beyond these aspects, we applied a profound ethnographic microanalysis of interactions (Erickson, 1992) and engaged in dialogic discourse analysis (Larraín & Medina, 2007; Linell, 2009; Ávila & Medina, 2012).

In the case of digital stories, we analyzed them through conceptual tools informed by a dialogic and narrative approach (Abril, 2007; Bakhtin, 1986; Contursi and Ferro, 2000). This implies a twofold process that describes each creation upon the basis of their semiotic components and narrative genres, but which also addresses the creative product from a discursive point of view. Two questions guided the last approach: What does the work say? With whom are we speaking?

3. Results

3.1. The difference in the creative process

Findings point to the relevance of school interactions within media education. Tensions with adult authority were omnipresent, and students negotiated their presentations taking into account what they assumed was required.

The openness that the workshop offered to youth practices and media preferences seemed to affect the schools’ technological administrators, so much so that after a series of discussions with students, they marginalized the workshop. A review of the field notes of the first sessions reveals that an attitude of calmness and passivity was observed in the majority of the students, who waited for adult instructions, showing little initiative to surf the Internet and use the website. An important factor in this regard was the fact that almost all the participating students had low proficiency levels in the use of technological resources. However, we also noticed a pedagogical interaction that tended to emphasize discipline, in which silence was imposed by the adult authority with a monologic style.

On the other hand, the encounter of students from the two schools through their creations sparked great interest among the adolescents. Their first moment of meeting occurred through the introductory videos that had been uploaded to the workshop's website. Students’ conceptions about the others and the space where they lived emerged during the activity in which they commented on the videos from the other school. These discursive interactions reveal the referents used and their valuations, along with the prejudices and stereotypes about the adolescents from Villarrica, who they still did not know at that time: poorer, "huasitos" (people that live in rural areas of center and south of the country), “with less to say”, but kinder and nicer than people from Santiago. Nothing of what was said referred to their being indigenous or Mapuche, nor to any ethnic characteristics. The students referred in this way to the possible characteristics of their peers from Villarria, projecting their imagination from the cultural representations that they had constructed with respect to what living in the "countryside" or in the south of the country entails. Linguistically, this is marked or inscribed in discourse through isolated words with the value of subjectivity (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997). These are lexical items of a nominal, adjectival, adverbial, or verbal nature, which present an affective, evaluative, or axiological mark that is within a continuum from stronger to weaker (Avila & Medina, 2012). In this case, the subjectivity are adjectival, and never refer to characteristics attributable to the students' indigenous or Mapuche origin.

The fragment presented in Table 1 presents some exchanges that display projections about the characteristics of their peers and their possible modes of interaction. Utterances useful for the analysis are underlined.

Table 1: Dialogic analysis of fragments of the transcription of the Plenary Session.

| Student 6 | Miss it's only that we don't know them well they may all be on that picture […] |
| Teacher   | but you what do you think if you knew them what do you think could happen […] what would communication be like who would say more I don't know you or them or would it be just as difficult for both […] |
| Student 1 | they might be quite bad-tempered |
| Student 2 | we speak more |
In the fragment above, the group is inscribed in discourse in terms of their identity as people from Santiago, using the first person plural pronoun we, in contrast with they, which is inscribed by opposition as the "huasitos", the people from the south. This we is usually combined with the subjective component of superiority or of "having more", "we", "we would have more…", "we have more…". They bear the subjective representation of inferiority or of having less: "they would have less". The we lives in the city, which is "bigger". In this respect, the use of the verb form is noteworthy, because it signals existence and divests from subjectivity the assertion in the discursive construction, as a way of supporting the statement that we, in Santiago, "would have more to say": "Santiago is bigger, THERE IS much more to say". Finally, this difference is clearly marked through adverbial subjectivity FEWER, ascribed to them, and MORE ascribed to us. It is interesting to note the presence of "huaso" or "huasito", a term used in Chile to refer to the inhabitants of the center and south of the country who perform the tasks typical of rural areas. By extension, this name refers to the peasants of these areas, and is used as an adjective. The reference to the typical Chilean character is a generalization that conceals the difference of the inhabitants of Villarrica, much further south, and their indigenous origins, especially Mapuche.

The fragment ends with a repetition of the idea that they could be from Santiago, alluding to the fact that they do not “look” too different from us. Therefore, even though some differences were projected, they only referred to the countryside life of their peers, and not to their ethnic traits, which were eventually diluted due to the appearance of their peers, which "could be" like that of the adolescents from Santiago.

3.2. The difference in digital storytelling

Tension between young people and the adult world is also present in the digital stories, in which there are two ways to deal with differences and conflicts: the first is to reduce adult presence: they are completely absent from some of the students' creations. In these cases the characters who lead the plot are the teenagers, who also solve problems all by themselves. The second way is to assign the adult an antagonistic role, usually associated with negative male images (thieves or rapists). Another interesting aspect is that adults, regardless of their explicit representation in the stories, become the main audiences to whom the stories are directed.

In these creations we can find the compromises and tensions of identity-production, within and outside the school context. Particularly in the case of female students, digital stories appeared as a privileged space where they discussed and contested female stereotypes. Almost all the stories created by female students have clever women
as main characters who confront crime and revert their condition of victims by means of a defiant and determined action; female environments which show that adolescents can achieve anything when they put their minds to something; female students who face and solve conflicts all by themselves with an aggressive attitude, traditionally identified with the male world. These images coexist with others that reinforce traditional female stereotypes.

Another relevant finding is that the digital stories tended to be heavily framed by the media and especially by television. This is particularly significant if we understand fictional genres from a discursive perspective (Bakhtin, 1986 and 2002), as fixed ways to enunciate which determine the style, composition, and approach to a subject [of a work of art]. Besides, genres, with their rules and distinctive signs, allowed these adolescents to fit in and participate in different social spheres: in this case, media culture.

In general, the stories we can classify as drama share one characteristic that stands out: the outcome is caused by a tragic and sudden situation, usually provoked by chance or fate. The appeal of stylistic resources from other genres, or sub-genres, such as soap opera or melodrama is marked by the nuclear subject of the story, and by teenage female archetypes: hysterical and vain women. The stories created by male or mixed groups introduced elements from other genres like action, superheroes, and anime.

If we compare the images and aesthetics of the digital stories with the photos taken in the first activity, in which each student introduced him or herself, we can observe several differences. While the scenes of the completed stories mostly reflect urban settings, the personal photos show rural contexts, animals, and open spaces. However, no ethnic markers referring to Mapuche culture were present.

This absence of Mapuche markers was also noted in the analysis of the course of the workshop. We only observed two specific situations in which students made reference to something close to this: first, in a discussion between two friends during a working session, when one of them called the other “Indian” as way of insulting him. The second situation happened during the final interview with a student who, according to her school teacher, was the only one who identified herself as Mapuche; on that occasion, the student mentioned her ethnic identity, explaining why she had a special scholarship. These two situations did not affect the course of the workshop or the creative process of each group.

4. Discussion

The low relevance of ethnic elements in the process and in the students' creations was noteworthy. As mentioned in association with the dialogic analysis of the discourse produced during the plenary session, the possible differences projected by the adolescents from Santiago, concerning their view of their peers from Villarrica as peasants, and the personal traits ascribed to them, typical of the Chilean imaginary about the inhabitants of the center and south of the country, did not include elements referencing ethnic, indigenous aspects. The general characteristics projected are eventually diluted by their peers' appearance, because “they could be from Santiago”.

This could be related to the great relevance that the media environment has nowadays in everyone’s lives, but also to the scope of action provided by the fact that the workshop brought technical and cultural resources to the participants. Media are associated with trans-cultural experiences, and apparently, in creations produced using them as a point of reference; it is possible to notice a limited range of references, and a homogenization of contents and styles. Probably this situation would be more expectable if we focused our work and analysis on individuals who are inexperienced or scarcely exposed to the Internet, as is the case of rural adolescents and indigenous communities. The sphere of the media is especially valued and admired by these teenagers, and to ensure an appropriate involvement, they see it as compulsory to respect the communicative genres that supposedly rule those areas. Acting otherwise, for example to use media and their cultural devices in a thoughtful and creative way to transgress genres and traditional models, requires not only a great knowledge of the languages and semiotic codes of these spheres, but also a conscious perspective about the generative dimension of media and ICTs.

This raises at least some challenges for media education. The first is related with the generation of experiences for teenage learning and development, which promote the knowledge and the use of media and their technological resources as a means of expression and differentiated positioning. The second is to expand the range of frames, genres, and semiotic and media resources available for children and teenagers, to offer them wider margins for
creativity and conscious positions to approach media production. The third and final challenge is the development of critical and appraisal criteria regarding the countless media products and contents that surround us, and the ones we create to tell or show something.

References


