



Nottingham 2011



The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Digital literature: finding new ways to motivate students to read Brazilian literature electronic books

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Abstract

This quantitative and qualitative study is aimed to diagnose and promote the use of new technologies in teaching literature reading in Public (State) Schools, assessing materials accessibility and computer skills. The research consisted of three distinct steps: 1. A survey to detect teachers' and students' computer skills, their use of computers and accessibility; 2. Search and list websites where users can either read or download Brazilian literature books; 3. Workshops on where and how to access these books. This research is also intended to reflect upon electronic books and their impact on reading.

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Keywords: literature; electronic books; reading.

1. Introduction

Technological progress triggers a variety of discussions over teaching and learning processes. Reading printed or electronic books, for instance, requires different strategies and can provide different factors of motivation. However, teachers' and students' conceptions about reading literature books is a matter that lies beneath the discussion about printed books versus electronic literature which is, according to Katherine Hyles (2008), "digital born", created in and to be read on a computer. Nevertheless, the primary question is: are teachers and students prepared to use computer tools to read digital books, either in terms of accessibility, abilities or desire?

2. Method

Students and teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire aimed at identifying their use of computers, access to electronic books and reading preferences. The same was also filled out by the schools' principals.

The survey took place in eight public state high schools in the city of Parnaíba – Piauí, Brazil, chosen from a total of thirteen schools, according to the researchers' access to them.

The participants consisted of ten Portuguese (language and literature) teachers. M of them were over twenty years old and had more than five years of teaching experience; thirty-one high school students from the first (35%), the second (26%) and the third (39%) years, whose ages ranged from 14 to 20 years (87%) and over 20 years old (13%).

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Internet tools were used to search for websites where students could read and/or download Brazilian literature books. These sites were then listed and their most important features described.

As we were dealing with action research, a meeting with researchers, students and teachers was set in order to present and discuss the results obtained.

3. Results

3.1. Students' and teachers' access and use of computers

The results showed that all teachers and 94% of the students have access to computers, either at home or at LAN Houses. However, students also look for alternative places to access the Internet, such as friends' houses and their school. Despite reporting more difficulties in accessing computers, when compared to teachers', the students' use of the same seemed to be a little higher than expected, not only related to time and frequency but also to their abilities. In addition, their motivations vary significantly, especially in relation to entertainment, (meeting friends and downloading files), which was the most important motivation students reported (35%), while teachers mentioned reading the news and doing research (70%).

3.2. Computers at schools

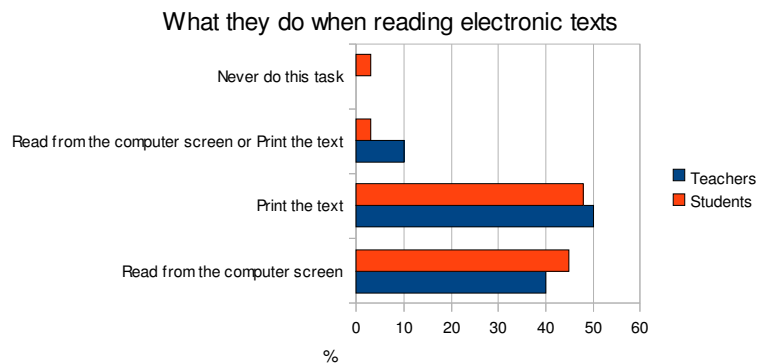
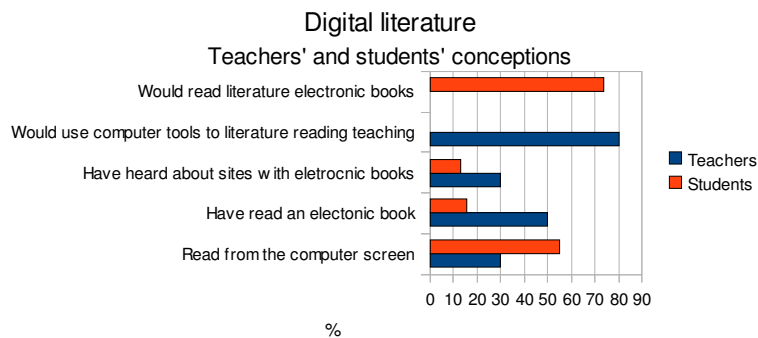
Although they are aware of the computer labs at their schools, students and teachers admitted not using them very often, either due to teachers' lack of knowledge or to restrictions applied to the students. When asked whether they believed that using those labs could enhance their classes, both students and teachers agreed that it would make the classes more interesting, especially due to new possibilities for interaction.

3.3. Students' and teachers' reading preferences

Physical books are the most reported reading material mentioned by students and teachers, followed closely by magazines. Students also reported enjoying reading for curiosity and pleasure and that they would read more literature books if they were readily accessible, this was a common opinion among teachers.

3.4. Digital literature: toward students' and teachers' conceptions

The tables below show us some conceptions and attitudes students have in relation to reading electronic books:



The first table emphasizes the desires that teachers and students have in relation to digital literature, but also their lack of information and experience on electronic reading. The second table highlights their need to print electronic texts and the higher resistance that teachers have to reading them on the computer.

3.5. Availability of Brazilian literature in electronic books

By searching the Internet we were able to identify some websites where teachers and students could legally download Brazilian literature electronic books. These sites were listed considering their electronic addresses (homepage), most important features, and accessibility. Among them, the government site www.dominipublico.gov.br must be highlighted since it is the original source for most of the sites found.

Nevertheless, some questions arise that must be taken into consideration: since according to copyright law these materials become public domain only 70 years after the author's death, legal downloads are restricted to either seventy-year old or older literature or works that are not part of the literary canon. Differences between reading online and file downloads are crucial aspects as well. Most digital libraries provide books to be read online, not as shared downloads that could be printed later. Besides, the process of digitalization of books can vary, even among virtual libraries. *Biblioteca Nacional Digital do Brasil* (<http://bndigital.bn.br/>), *Literatura Digital: Biblioteca de Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa* (<http://www.literaturabrasileira.ufsc.br/>), and *Biblioteca Brasileira USP* (<http://www.brasiliana.usp.br/>) are some of the Brazilian digital libraries that must be visited.

3.6. A feedback to teachers and students

The results showed that the lack of knowledge was the most significant reason that hinders the reading of electronic books by students and teachers, not the accessibility or desire as might be expected. The researchers, then, went back to the schools to provide them feedback on the results of the study and to show where and how they could access Brazilian literature books by using computer tools. Their goal was to promote the use of these tools as a factor of motivation to increase students' interest in reading, especially Brazilian literature.

After the presentation, researchers, teachers and students debated the ideas presented. The students reinforced the idea that using computers would make their classes more interesting, although it would be difficult not to visit other sites during their reading classes. They also questioned other students' answers to the questionnaires, especially about online reading. On the other hand, teachers reported poor conditions of school labs and the need for training courses. That meeting triggered self-reflections upon their teaching and learning processes.

4. Discussion

Because Brazil is such a large country, we face many differences in a variety of aspects (economic, social, cultural, educational, etc.). In teaching practices, for example: while the richest state in Brazil, São Paulo, announces the purchase of digital desks for some of its public schools, a number of teachers are not yet prepared to use the basic computer tools to teach literature.

This gap not only reflects the differences between poor and rich but also between the students, and teachers' conceptions. The students are eager to use these tools to enhance their learning process, since technology is already part of their lives; as for the teachers, while they recognize their difficulties using the online tools, they are also reluctant to change this situation as they don't feel they are part of the new technology generation and, therefore, lack computer skills.

Despite the difficulties mentioned, teachers and students seem to share the same opinion: digital literature is a way to enhance literature-reading tasks. Yet, either being a developed or under-developed state, region or country, simple actions like the ones proposed by this research can lead to reflections and, as a result, promote changes in the educational system.

5. Conclusions

According to Eco (2010: 17), the components of books may evolve, but they will never change what a book really is. As for its creation, Hayles (2008: 03) says that it is not a matter of being printed or not, but created on and to be read on a computer. In this case, an electronic reader, a person who does not need to

print a text anymore (Chartier, 1999: 94) is truly required. Discussing digital literature includes discussing the aspects mentioned previously. However, among all these aspects, the reader himself must be considered above all the advantages or challenges electronic reading can offer, especially when it comes to the teaching and learning processes in which teachers and students play essential roles and, therefore, should have the same level of skills to use computers. Digital literature provides a good way to motivate students to read literature, in this scenario.

6. Acknowledgements

This research was part of a Iniciação Científica Voluntária Program from Universidade Federal do Piauí (UFPI) and it was carried out by undergraduate students of Tourism. I would like to thank these students for voluntarily dedicating their efforts to its development as well as the UFPI for the opportunity given. Very special thanks to all the teachers and students who kindly collaborated by sharing their opinions, difficulties and knowledge.

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