

# Have You Got the App?

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Departing from this most recurrent question asked to teachers as “the” response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the present work aims at analyzing its relations with the intensive use of private platforms in public schools, especially in developing countries. Based on Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2006; 2010), it aims at grasping the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of so-called “learning objects”. Referring to Barreto (2021), it deals with the supposed universal character and validity of the mentioned objects, offered to all students as replacement of teaching and school work. The aim is to address the educational incorporation of information and communication technologies as the deepest sort of technological substitution, regarding teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards critical reading, in hybrid/remote teaching (“blended learning”). In short, instead of simply paraphrasing the objects involved, the way to social emancipation is (re)contextualizing them in the struggle for hegemony. In other words, there is no definite application as “the” answer, even when the students can equally access the target digital materials.

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## Technologies in Education

The unusual title of this text intends to take that and other questions, usual and colloquial language practices, as standpoints to approach the ways information and communication technologies (henceforth ICTs) have been (re)contextualized in educational policies, especially in developing countries (Barreto, 2008).

The theme is not new, as the date above shows, but it has acquired another and quite different dimension. There has been a movement from educational (re)contextualization to technological substitution. In other words, ICTs are not taken as materials to aggregate value to teaching, but “learning objects” to be used instead, delivered by platforms, as the Big Five (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft) and specific applications (i.e. Google Classroom), especially during the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, when schools have been closed in order to maintain social isolation (Barreto, 2021).

To approach the new dimension of the question, critical reading is fundamental and its base can be found in Critical Discourse Analysis, formulated by Norman Fairclough.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

From a Critical Discourse Analysis standpoint, based on the assumption that language is “a material form of ideology” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 73), an attempt is made to approach the dialectic between structures and strategies in educational policies.

First of all, it should be noticed that the target texts (different forms of semiosis) tend to forecast a sort of Brave New World, as if technologies could solve any problems. Technical dimensions are emphasized, while

political ones remain untouched. Computers by the dozens are to be distributed so as to “grant” access to knowledge: to bridge the digital divide, as if it were the only one. Technological determinism and substitution are basic assumptions: (1) there has been a “revolution” caused by technologies themselves (multiple determinations and the very conditions of their production denied); and (2) being the “origin” of such a revolution, ICTs are also the only way to improve education (teacher education and working conditions disregarded). The mere presence of computers stands for “democratization” of knowledge, now regarded as a factor of production similar to land, capital, enterprise, or labour.

This attempt to analyze Brazilian educational policies must recognize they are part of concrete struggles for hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) at different levels (e.g. global and local). Therefore, ideology is taken as hegemony of meaning: neither a hidden one to be unveiled, nor something missing and waiting for completion, but a sort of excess or “over-completion” which remains unquestioned and which is legitimized in specific conditions.

(Re)contextualization is a key concept, considering “governance-related conditionalities” imposed by international financial agencies on Southern countries, as well as the mediations in their “Brazilian translation”, referring to “a complex phenomenon, involving not a simple colonization, but also an active process of appropriation whose character and outcomes depend upon diverse circumstances in diverse contexts” (Fairclough, 2006, p. 101).

In this relational approach, intertextual analysis takes the discourse of educational policies in Brazil as constrained by the discourses of “globalization” and of the “knowledge-based economy”, emphasizing the emerging connection between them. Material dimensions, such as “liberalization” of trade in services, are to be related to symbolic reductions: (1) teacher education to training a set of competencies; and (2) ICTs to distance learning strategies and materials to award educational qualifications.

In a discourse characterized by systematic omission of agencies/agents, nominalization, “new” vocabulary and different grammatical features, structural problems and their concrete manifestations may be kept aside. In order to grasp the contradictory relations which constitute ICTs’ (re)contextualization in educational policies, the main agents (voices to be heard) are: international and national government agencies, the media and academic analysis.

Summing up, discourse is a historical instance of language and texts are ways to discourse. Texts are semiotic materials (including not only words), to be analyzed in three dimensions: semantic (word choices), syntactic (relations), and pragmatical (people’s positions in relation to what they say/mean).

As for this short text, stressing the semiotic dimension, a keyword is “resignification”. Words may be the same, but they acquire other meanings. That is the case for “learning”, while “teaching” tends not to be mentioned anyway. But although recurrent, “learning” may stand for different actions in the discourse of agencies such as the World Bank. Barreto (2008) lists some of them: accessing “knowledge”, expanding “access to learning opportunities”, “access to learning”, and “to access learning”, without any qualification or additional information, as if learning did not refer to an internal process.

### **A Synthetic Critical Text**

During the pandemic, a text captured on Facebook is an important mention.

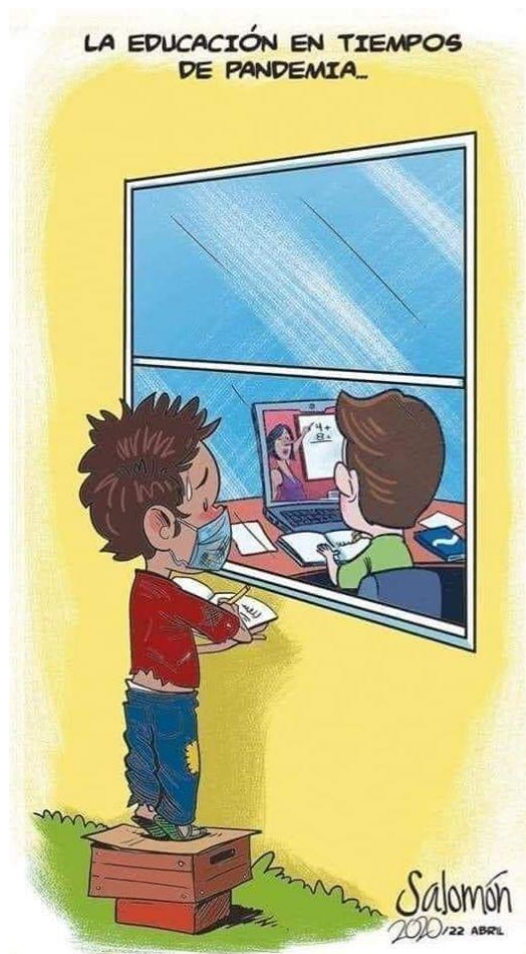


Figure 1.

Its title could be: two boys and a window. This window separates and unites them. It is a neat closed window. Inside the room, a white boy accesses a class. Outside, a black poor boy, standing on a wooden crate, tries to take notes, although he probably can hardly hear what the teacher in the application is trying to teach.

Of course, this text is a critical one. Many others are not. But this is precisely the reason why reading must be critical. In other words, texts are to be (re)contextualized in the struggle for hegemony (Gramsci, 1971).

### **Struggle for Hegemony**

To approach the struggle for hegemony, most of the time harsh and unequal, means to analyze the delivery movements and resistance of the subjects to the sedimented senses and possible displacements. The search is to understand the constitutive mechanisms of the struggle for the legitimacy of the different senses, since, in the midst of historically possible senses, one tends to be more “read” than the others: it is formalized and legitimized, while the others may not even be considered. In other words, in a discursive historical perspective, ideology corresponds to the hegemony of meaning.

There can be no unique answer or ready-made solution to any concrete problems. Critical reading implies grasping hegemonic meanings and the conditions of their production. It is not simple, but it is central to social emancipation.

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