DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 064   SP 035 354

AUTHOR   Bertrand, Yves
TITLE   The Bermuda Triangle of Education.
PUB DATE   Apr 94
NOTE   16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
             American Educational Research Association (New
             Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE   Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints
             (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Communication Problems;
             *Community Development; *Cultural Influences;
             Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education;
             Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Ideology;
             *Instruction; Role of Education
IDENTIFIERS Empowerment

ABSTRACT
        The pedagogical triangle of teacher, learner, and
subject matter has in its center a fourth element: the communication
system. Each feature of the pedagogical triangle, and the
communication system as well, relies on a very important cultural
component. Problems occur when communication processes in a classroom
are fragmented and related to different cultures and ideologies.
There is quite a distance between the school's culture and the
students' culture. Academic discourses provoke students' resistance
because they are remote from their everyday preoccupations. There are
differences between classical culture and the industrial culture
called modernity or postmodernity. Models of teachings and
pedagogical theories belong to a different cultures. The common
culture needed to exchange information is lacking. Education is a
part of the problem because it provides an inadequate basis for
learning to create a new culture. Education should place a priority
on creating a "virtual educational community" with a communication
system based on a common culture. Key factors in achieving this
virtual educational community include use of an inductive curriculum
based on real social and cultural problem solving, student
involvement, empathetic communication between students and teachers,
and teacher emphasis on empowerment of students rather than on
control. (Contains 24 references.) (JDD)

The Bermuda Triangle of Education

Yves Bertrand

Télé–University of Québec

1. Introduction

In education we deal with persons who are exchanging information. In teaching situations, we deal with persons who are trying to show something to somebody in an organized way of communication. So, communication is supposed to be important in the education process. Let's check the relation between communication and culture in the classroom.

2. Common features of the teaching situation

When we consider a teaching situation, we see some common features (Bertrand, 1979 and 1993; Bertrand and Valois, 1992; Houssaye, 1993; Posner, 1989): teacher, learners, subject matter and context. The number of essential features can vary from an author to another. For instance, Posner (1989) says that all teaching situations have three features in common: teachers or teaching agent, learner, subject matter (academic knowledge, personal feelings, technical skills). These features are related to a social context (rules, facilities, values, expectations, personal backgrounds). He adds:

> "This triad occurs within the fourth feature of a teaching situation – a social and physical context consisting of rules, facilities, values, expectations, and personal backgrounds, which act as resources, constraints, and direct influences on teaching and learning".

Posner (1989) concludes that "any particular conception of education, whether psychological, sociological, or philosophical, provides at best one perspective of this whole, and, more typically, one perspective on one facet of the whole". Figure 1 summarizes these features.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

```
Social Context
(background)
                              Teacher


Learner                              Subject Matter
```

Figure 1 The basic pedagogical triad
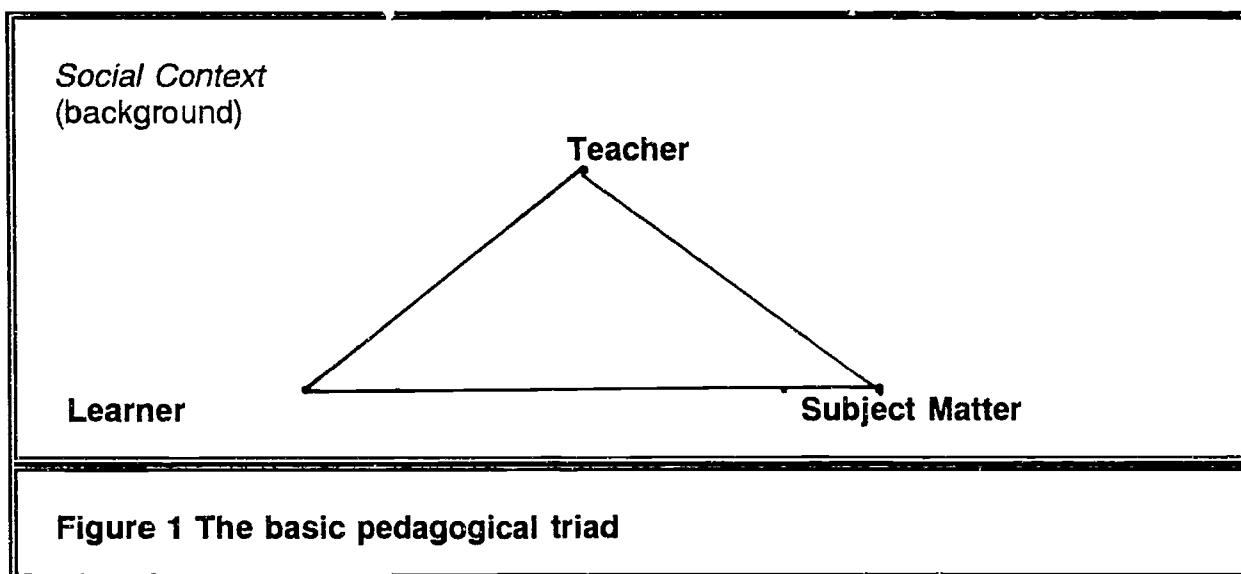
Well, maybe something is missing from Posner's analysis. Teaching is communication. So, we must include in our description the communication structure. According to Ferstermacher (1986), the features of the activity called teaching are:

> "1) There is a person who possesses some
> 2) contents who
> 3) intends to convey or impart content to
> 4) a person, who initially lacks content, such that
> 5) these two persons engage in a relationship for the purpose of acquiring content."

These features are the reference points of all teaching situations and are the pillars of many reflexions on education. This is the basic structure of a teaching relationship. From my point of view, the pedagogical triangle (Society, learner, subject matter) has in its center a fourth element: the communication system (teaching, media, relationships, technology,) as we can see in the figure 2.

```
                        Society

                    Communication
                       System

        Learner                    Subject Matter
```

Figure 2 The Four Features of Teaching
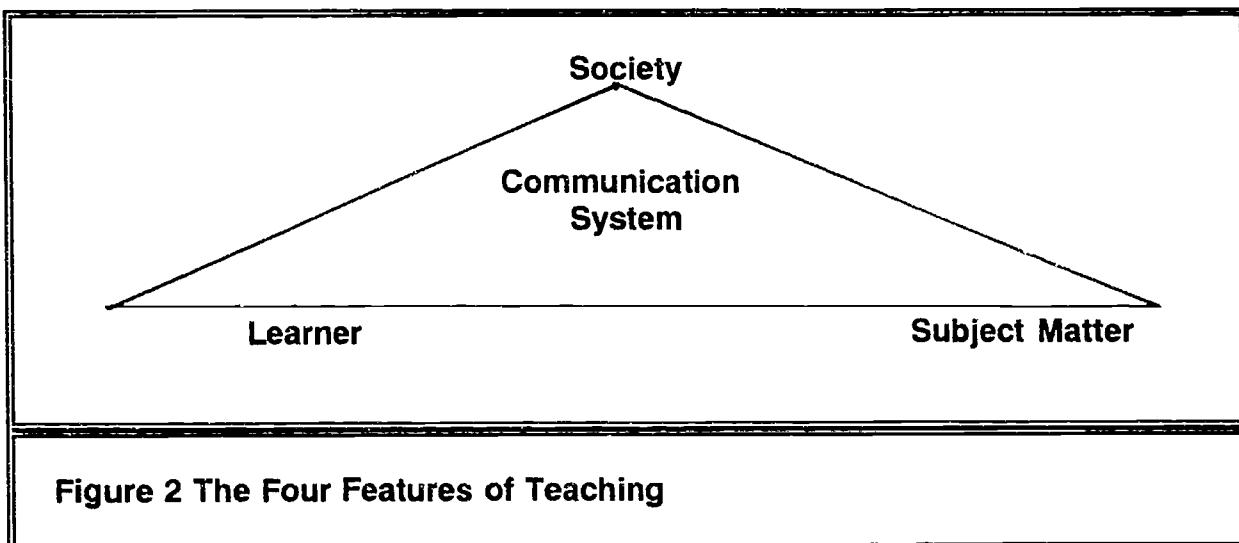
3. The cultural paradigm

Let me introduce, at this point, another working hypothesis: the educational background is mostly cultural. My hypothesis is that each feature of the pedagogical triangle relies on a very important cultural component. Culture means: perceptions, previous knowledge and daily routines that structure everybody's action in a society. In other words, the teaching situation is, above all, a cultural situation. It is structured and nourished by the electronic media, by readings and by conversations. So, if we use a cultural map to describe a teaching situation, we have, at least, four cultures related to:

1) the communication system (teachers, communication technology)
2) the students,
3) the subject matter and the curriculum,
4) the society.

These relations between curriculum, students, teachers and society, and the perceptions of these relations are the basic structures of the communication going on in a classroom. Figure 3 summarizes these features.

```
                        Culture
                        (Society)



                        Culture
                 Communication system




    Culture                                    Culture
    Students                                   Curriculum
```

Figure 3 Cultures in the classroom
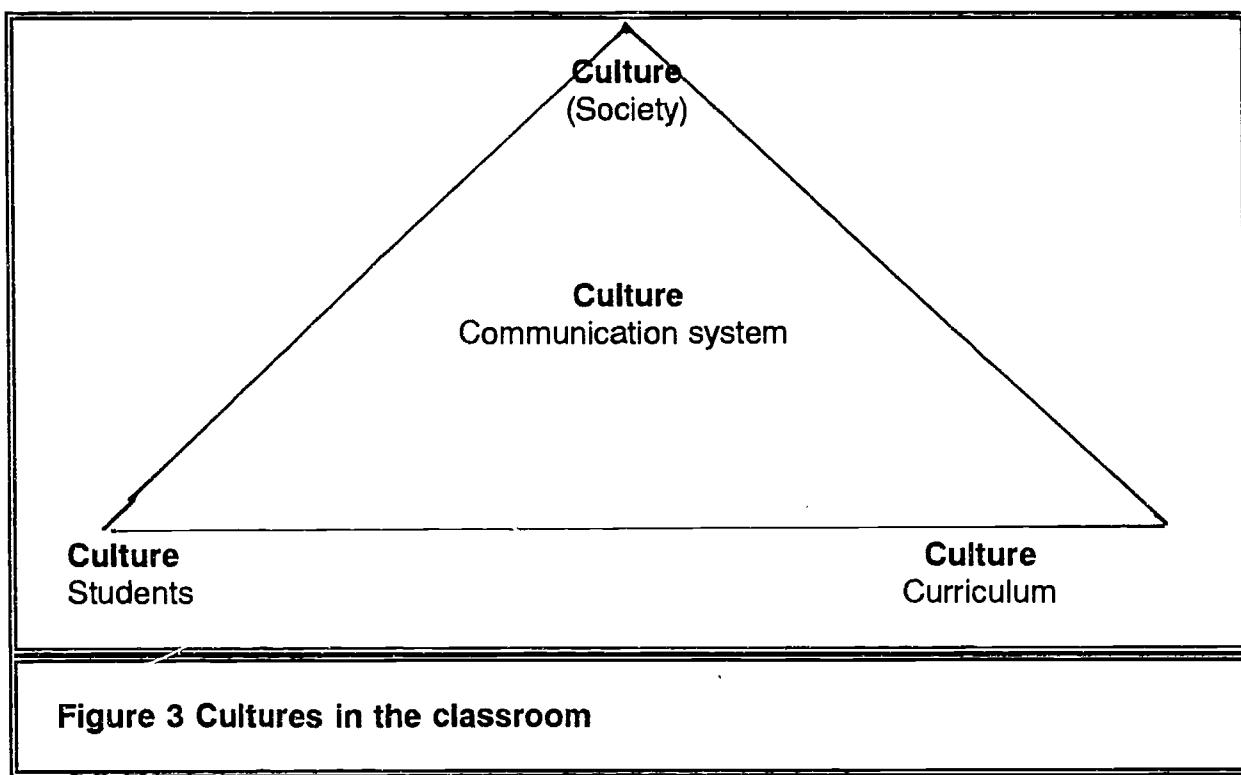
I suggest, in my cultural approach, that: 1) communication, in a teaching situation, is always related to cultural backgrounds, and that 2) the cultural backgrounds are, most of the time, different if not antagonists.

Everybody is interpreting what must be the knowledge that the student must get in the school. Even the subject matter belongs to a certain culture. The curriculum in a teaching situation is always related to cultural differences. These differences can be huge. For example, the teaching of liberal arts in Africa or China could be very surprising for the students. Thinkers such as Allan Bloom or Cardinal Newman, are persuaded that education must be liberal. Education is the transfer of classical culture (liberal arts, Great Books, Ancient Philosophy). It is a transfer of information from the humanist to a student who does not have this culture. Graff (in Heron, 1988) writes:

> "When Newman and other Victorian sages were promoting humanistic culture as a form of disinterested knowledge for its own sake, that culture was functioning as a powerful instrument in the shaping of middle class consciousness and the legitimation of middle class mobility".

Bloom (1987) thinks that the curricula must rely on the classics and writes:

"Men may live more truly and fully in reading Plato and Shakespeare than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and are forgetting their accidental lives".

Paolo Freire's point of view of education is completely different. He (1993) thinks that education is something else than a transfer of information. Freire's central thesis is (H.Raynolds, *Preface* in Freire, 1993):

"That public education must play a decisive role in the continuing reformation of a democratic society in which all of us can have the freedom and opportunity to create knowledge from our own experience".

There is also a culture related to the communication system (Teacher, technology of communication, classroom). One subset of this culture of communication is the teacher's culture (models of teaching, experience, values, preconceived judgments, goals) that organizes the everyday relations in a classroom. It is assumed by the teacher that he knows the best way to teach in a classroom. Joyce, Weil and Showers (1993) say that:

"Learning environments, viewed from a cultural perspective, are variations on our basic cultural theme. That is, all of the approaches to teaching that have dominated our literature for the last 25 years have had their origins in Western societies. They belong well within the cultural mainstream. Put another way, all of our models of teaching represent variety within the culture, but they are not culturally different. They have originated with scholars and teachers who belong not only to the same genus and species but to the same normative configuration."

Let's look, finally, to the students' culture. The students' culture is a very important piece of the cultural puzzle in the classroom. We forget that the students have their own cultural background. Their knowledge is structured in a certain way responding to their cultural situation. This culture doesn't correspond to the culture embedded in a subject matter. Usually, teachers think without any doubt that knowledge (e.g. mathematics, philosophy, physics, history) has an instant meaning for the students who are coming from different cultural background. Kristin Ross (1993), from the University of California at Santa Cruz, says that:

"Our foremost problem (and I think, the most vital question facing the humanities in the 1990s) was how to come to terms with emergent cultures within the US, as well as with those non-Euro-American cultures, Islamic for example, that have traditionally existed within the university in a realm of specialized isolation".

4. The Bermuda triangle

The problem is that communication processes in a classroom are fragmented and related to different cultures and ideologies[1].

Everybody is talking about the pedagogical triangle forgetting that all the information is disappearing in the centre of the cultural triangle! The classroom is like the Bermuda triangle[2]! There is a black hole[3] in the communication process. The educational information is going down the drain because people have difficulties to understand what is going on in the classroom. On a long run, nobody is listening to nobody in the classroom!

We must know that there is a clash between these cultures trying to live in the same place: the classroom!

1) First, there is quite a distance between the school's culture and the students' culture. The latter is quite different from the environment called schooling. Paradoxically, if the student's knowledge has nothing to do with the school's culture, the student is learning this difference and becomes a marginal and frustrated student. Students can experience great discomfort in the environments in which they find themselves. Joyce, Weil and Showers (1993) write:

"Educators create environments, but they clearly cannot do the learning (...) If the learner is marginal with respect to a particular environment, then educational productivity for that learner is likely to be depressed (...). The learner becomes

---

[1] Gore (1993) writes: " The conditions for the formation of each strand of radical pedagogy discourse are also elaborated in terms of institutional location and links to particular political and social movements and intellectual traditions".

[2] "It is the stuff of legends: a 140,000 square miles stretch of the Atlantic Ocean that seems to swallow unfortunate voyagers like a space-time warp. During the the past 45 years, more thant 100 ships and planes have disappeared in the triangular region - roughly bounded by Bermuda, southern Florida and the Greater Antilles (Puerto Rico) - often in circumstances as murky and mysterious as the storm-tossed sea itself". Adapted from *Time*, May 27, 1991.

[3] Anne Banks writes: "Robert Patton describes his grandfather as "generally sucking the life out of anyone venturing too near, like a black hole inhaling a star". Anne Banks, "First in War, Last in Peace", *The New York Times Book Review*, March 13, 1994.

frustrated and, very likely, learns that he or she cannot be productive in that environment."

The differences and, sometimes, the cultural boundaries between students and teachers can explain this frustrating experience. Joyce, Weil and Showers (1993) suggest that the cultural factor is dominant in the marginality:

"The learner may (or may not) have a smaller vocabulary than the average person but does possess a vocabulary, has internalized the basic linguistic properties of our language, has been a participant in the cultural process, and has been an observer of adults as they behave in our society. In others words, our learner is not culturally different from the rest of us, although, within the cultural boundaries, the learner may be relatively unsophisticated."

2) Secondly, academic discourses provoke students' resistance because they are remote from their everyday preoccupations. Jonathan Cohn (1993) says:

"As Jon Katz wrote in Rolling Stone, "The essence of kid culture is to be distinct from, even repulsive to, the old. Otherwise, what's the point?"

Shor (1992b) says that:

"The students' language of everyday life is familiar and concrete but not critical or scholarly; the teacher's language is academic but not colloquial or concretely related to student experience".

Specialists deliver, in teacher-centered classes, packaged information to students who are not familiar with these scientific cultures and languages. Teachers forget that the student's culture is not a scientific or a philosophical one. The students' language and culture are based on television[4], on movies and on relations between friends and parents. Jonathan Cohn (1993) says:

"Today's cutting-edge music and styles are, in part, an angry response to the materialistic and status-conscious decade in which today' youth came of age."

The source of legitimacy of knowledge is not, for the students, the teacher but, most of the time, the television. Cohn (1993) writes:

" MTV becomes a real, if not altogether legitimate, source of information for

---

[4] "Generally indifferent to politics and frequently insecure about uncertain family structures, MTV was the perfect surrogate parent: It demanded nothing and offered security." (Cohn, 1993).

millions of young viewers."

3) Thirdly, there are some differences between classical culture and the industrial culture called modernity or postmodernity. The teachings from Plato or Aristotle on truth and ethics are quite different from the industrial culture based on racism, violence and intolerance.

4) Fourth, models of teachings and pedagogical theories belong to different cultures (Bertrand and Valois, 1992). H.Giroux (1993) argues that pedagogy:

> "Is a discourse that should extend the principles and practices of human dignity, liberty, and social justice by engaging in social criticisms that acknowledge the serious threats faced by schools, critical cultural spheres, and the state of democracy itself".

Jennifer Gore (1993) says:

> "Unlike mainstream pedagogical discourses, the critical and feminist work on pedagogy has addressed "macro" issues in schooling, such as the institutions and ideologies within which pedagogy is situated. Beginning from the premise that schooling is not neutral, critical and feminist approaches to pedagogy emphasizes their own social visions(s) for education and schooling, in an attempt to connect the macro and micro."

Figure 4 Bermuda triangle of education
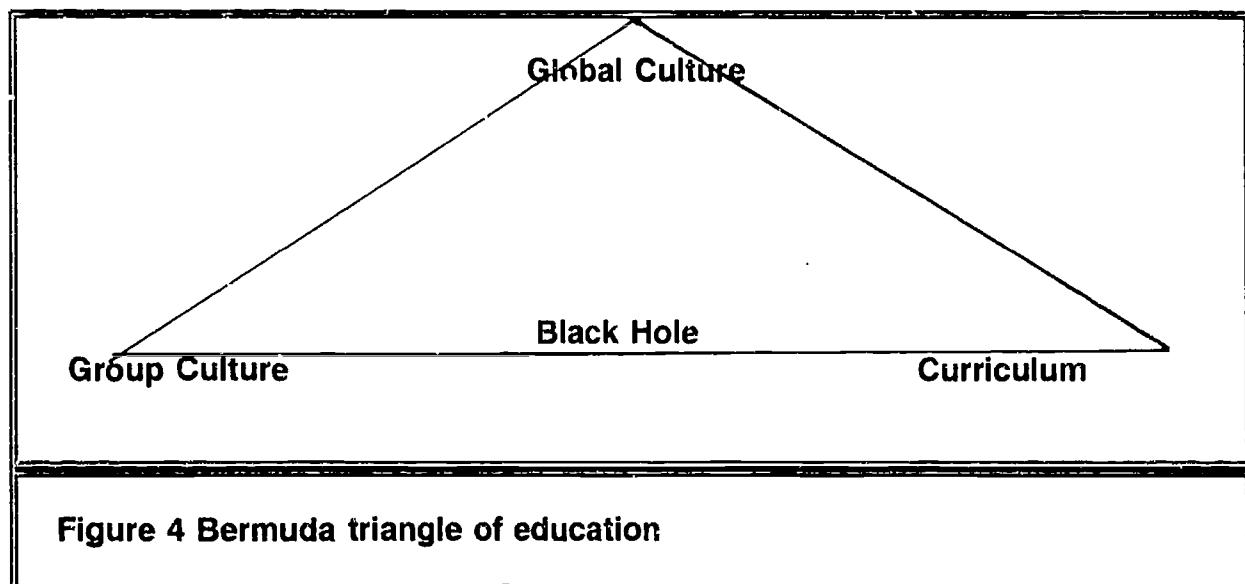
This cultural triangle can be detailled in more specific terms:

Global Culture	Culture industries, Mass values (commodification, reproduction), mass media, instrumental rationality, mass culture, concept of nature as instrumental, cultural conformity
Communication system	Dialectical energy (groups resistance, defense patterns, antagonistic exchanges)
Group culture	Generation X, social aspirations, research for higher values, need for social transformation, developmental patterns
Curriculum	Hidden values (agenda), print-based knowledge, cultural patterns

5. The virtual educational community

Everybody is assuming that he's the one who knows what is going on in a classroom. Well, that is not so! Consequently, the common culture needed to exchange information is lacking. The common ground that helps the communication between partners is not there. Usually, educational processes reinforce a set of cultural beliefs in progress, in individualism and in individual learning. Education is a part of the problem because it provides an inadequate basis for learning to create a new culture. Our present industrial culture is also a part of the problem. Emphasis put by the society on the rat race does not help the emergence of new attitudes related to the interdependency of nature, culture and human beings.

5.1 Virtual space of communication

One education's priority must be the creation, in the classroom, of a communication system based on a common culture. The communication system must put together

people in some kind of virtual common space. We have to cross the frontiers between the school's culture, the student's culture and the society's culture. It is necessary to create a new space of communication. I call this space *a virtual educational community*. It is based on the idea that we have to create interest groups in order to reinstall live communication circuits. J. Kapica (1993) writes:

> "Cyberspace is creating a whole new manner in which people think, speak and relate to another. (...) Urban designers say modern cities have destroyed the town square, that essential place where we can see and be seen, talk to friends and catch up on the latest gossip."

We find a similar idea in Shor (1992b): the critical dialogue. Shor says:

> "When critical dialogue works, teachers and students reinvent their relationship and their modes of communicating. They create a dialogic discourse in a mutual inquiry. I call this invented discourse the third idiom because it is different from the two conflicting ones brought to class by students and teachers: nonacademic everyday speech and academic teacher–talk."

5.2 Community groups

Every classroom must focus on common interests debated by small community groups. These groups learn about themselves and their communities[5]. They take charge of the process. Teachers must try to make connections between different cultures. Working on issues drawn from the students' culture and from the society could lead to pedagogical projects. In other words, teachers must get out of the school to find real problems that are crucial for the society. They must reestablish the connection between the daily culture, the social problems and the scientific knowledge. Doing this, they create a new communication system that is not student–centered or teacher–centered. It is a community–centered pedagogy reflected in each cultural project or situation.

5.3 Inductive curriculum

One key to a new pedagogical culture could be the *inductive curriculum* based on a real context for students. The social and cultural context can be the source of so many

---

[5] As Nisbet (1970) says, "community includes but goes beyond local community to encompass religion, work, family, and culture; it refers to social bonds characterized by emotional cohesion, depth, continuity, and fullness. (...) *Alienation* is a historical perspective within which man is seen as estranged, anomic, and rootless when cut off from the ties of community and moral purpose."

meaningful problems. McLean (1989) says that:

> "Research, now backed by experience, suggests that more students, especially in the middle school, will learn mathematics and science skills and concepts by working on problems meaningful to them, problems in which they see a purpose for the skills and concepts. Meaningful problems offer natural ways to integrate language arts with science, mathematics and social studies".

McLean (1989) writes: "A review of mathematics and science textbooks reveals some creative and challenging exercises and problems (...). The common feature, however, is the lack of meaning of the context – most entirely lack a real context."

5.4 Personal mastery

Efficacy in learning is linked to a personal vision, that is: information, action and power. We know well that student involvement is low in traditional classroom. To help students to develop participatory habits, teachers must begin teaching from the students' situation, from their understanding of the subject matter (Shor, 1992b) and from their life projects. Another key to good participation is empathic communication between students and teachers. The most important principle in the field of interpersonal relationships is: seek first to understand, then to be understood. As says R. Covey (1989),

> "Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel."

Participation supposes, also, that students have some power on the educational process. Empowerment means to give students the authority to make decisions on their own. Students must have access to information needed to make decisions and they must be responsible for the making of their own projects. Participation is a matter of power distribution in the group.

Finally, long lasting learning is possible only if a student has a personal vision and a project to go with. These two elements are the keys to personal mastery. As says Senge (1990):

> "Personal mastery entails clarifying personal vision, and holding creative tension, simultaneously focusing on the vision and current reality and allowing the tension between the two to generate energy toward achieving the vision."

5.5 Curriculum based on social issues

Problems associated with ecological crisis, social inequalities and technological innovations deserve attention from the educators. The main problem is that our cultural

beliefs about the effectiveness of educational systems contribute to the degradation of the society. We think that we are changing something in the society but we are limited to small pedagogical innovations like clearly defining behavioral objectives. These problems are too specific to the school culture.

We must find a new educational culture if we want to pass on new cultural templates to the next generation. There is a significant literature dealing with models of education, with the ecological crisis and with many specific problems in the industrial society. Shifting the educational paradigm from the school culture to society and to the ecosystem is our main task in education because we belong, at least, to the planet's ecosystem. A new educational culture fosters the sense of responsible citizenship and encourages research in alternate communication strategies. It suggests a larger view of the world and, in the same time, a focus on local experiences and situations. It reminds us that education must connect to society.

This connection is a very important issue. Bowers (1993) says that:

> "If the thinking that guides educational reform does not take account of how the cultural beliefs and practices passed on through schooling relate to the deepening ecological crisis, then these efforts may actually strengthen the cultural orientation that is undermining the sustaining capacities of natural systems upon which all life depends".

Another key to this new pedagogy could be the use of cultural allegory. Ross (1993) thinks that we might contribute to the formation of a cultural identity based on the comparison and contrast between cultural situations. Ross (1993) writes:

> "For the Puerto Rican student who complained of a lack of representation of his own particular culture, the task in our set of courses becomes that of constructing his cultural identity allegorically, that is, of seeing in the narrative or situation of another cultural struggle or project – that of white women in Italy, for example, or Koreans in Japan, of Chicanos in the southwestern United States – an allegory for his own cultural narratives."

5.6 Coaching

Teachers may be more committed to control, authority, order, prediction, and power than they are to producing results. They may not feel responsible for the poor results produced by their group. A new communication setup requires us to learn how to transfer our thinking from "attempting to control others" to "empowering others". In short, if we are interested in increases in educational system performance, we shall have to commit

ourselves to shifting the prevailing teaching paradigm[6] from controlling to empowering (Evered and Selman, 1989; Shor, 1992, Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1992; Gore, 1993). The prevailing educational paradigm focuses heavily on control, order, and compliance, with the consequence that people become objectified, measured, and expended. Coaching focuses on discovering actions that enable and empower people to contribute more, fully, productively, and with less alienation than the control model entails. As Evered and Selman say (1989), the teacher's job is to spot the student's blind spots, with the sole objective of providing whatever is needed for the student to excel beyond prior limits. The presumption of the relationship is that people have limits (barriers) which may be surpassed through mutual commitment (partnership) of both the coach and the student. Coaching is based on partnership, on mutuality and on relationship.

Social Issues
Community groups

Virtual space
(Networking, coaching,
participatory processes,
empathic communication)

Personal vision,
power and mastery

Cultural inductive
curriculum

Figure 5 Virtual educational community

---
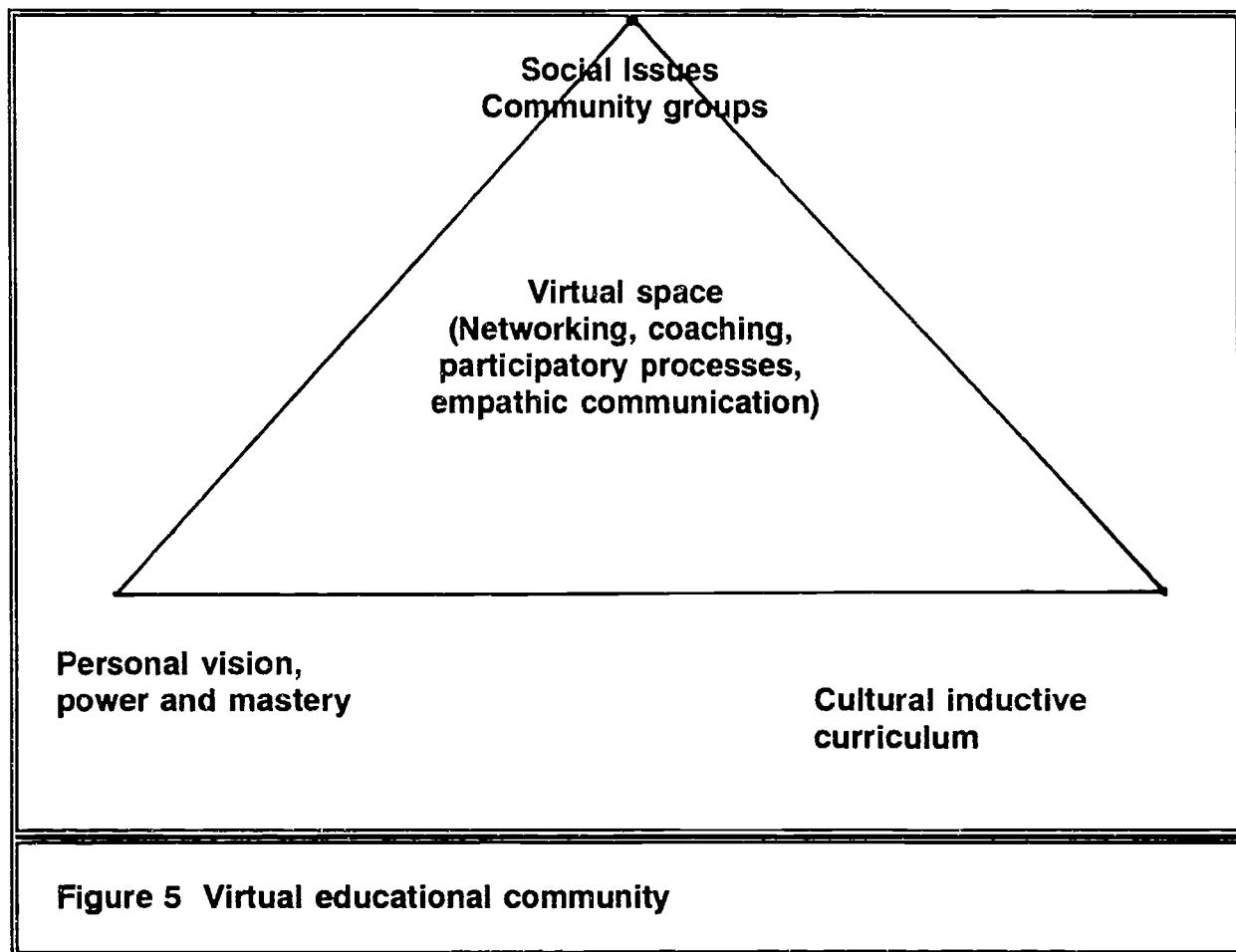
[6] "By paradigm we mean the set of assumptions, everyday truths, and conventional wisdom about people and how they work in organizations." (Evered and Selman, 1989).

6. Conclusion

These different strategies can be useful tools in constructing a good pedagogical environment. It can help to solve the problems related to the mismatching of cultures in a classroom. The creation of a virtual common culture in a virtual community can stop the energy going in the black hole and facilitate, instead, a new educational synergy.

_____

Bibliography

BERTRAND, Y. (1979). _Les modèles éducationnels._ Montréal: University of Montréal.

BERTRAND, Y. (1993). _Théories contemporaines de l'éducation._ Lyon, France: Chronique sociale.

BERTRAND, Y. VALOIS, P. (1992). _Ecole et sociétés._ Montréal: Agence d'ARC.

BLOOM, A. (1987). _The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students._ New York: Simon & Schuster.

BOWERS, C.A. (1993). _Education, Cultural Myths, and the Ecological Crisis._ Albany: State University of New York Press.

CLIFFORD, J. (1988). _The Predicament of Culture._ Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press.

COHN, J. (1993). "MTV: More Sheepish than Subversive". _Boston Sunday Globe,_ nov. 28th.

COVEY, S (1989). _The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People._ New York: Simon & Schuster.

EVERED, R.D., SELMAN, J.C. (1989). "Coaching and the Art of Management". _Organizational Dynamics,_ vo. 18, no 2, Autumn, pp.16–32.

FENSTERMACHER, G. (1986). "Philosophy of Research on Teaching: Three Aspects". In C.C. Wittrock, (Ed), _Handbook of Research on Teaching,_ New York: Macmillan.

FREIRE, P. (1993). _Pedagogy of the City._ New York: Continuum.

GIROUX, H. (1992). *Border Crossings*. New York: Routledge.

GORE, J.M. (1993). *The Struggle for Pedagogies*. New York: Routledge.

HERRON, J. (1988). *Universities and the Myth of Cultural Decline*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

HOUSSAYE, J. (1993) (Ed.). *La pédagogie: une encyclopédie pour aujourd'hui*. Paris: ESF.

JOYCE, B., WEIL, M., SHOWERS, B., (1993). *Models of Teaching*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Fourth edition.

KAPICA, J. (1993). "The Virtual Community". *The Globe and Mail*, July 3.

KELLNER, D. (1989). *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

LOVELOCK, J. (1988). *The Ages of Gaia*. New York: Norton.

MCLEAN, L. (1989). *The Inductive Curriculum: Integrated Teaching and Learning for the Middle School*. Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

POSNER, G.J. (1989). *Field Experience*. New York: Longman.

ROSS, K. (1993). "The World Literature and Cultural Studies Program". *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no 4.

SENGE, P.M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday.

SHOR, I. (1992). *Culture Wars*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.