Introduction

The relevance of situating the integration of information and communication technologies in the context of critical research

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THE SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION generated by new technologies, the redefinition of the economy, the role of the state, and the hegemonic articulation of the concept of an information-and-knowledge society have all placed formal education once more at the centre of a political and socio-economic crucible. In this sixth issue of *Encounters/Encuentros/Rencontres* authors from Spain, Canada, and Latin America explore from their intellectual and existential standpoints issues pertaining to the integration of new technologies in relation to teaching-and-learning and to institutional policies and practices. The papers in this issue mainly address integration in relation to higher education. They reflect a concern with the ethical dimensions of teaching and learning and with the need to embed the process of integration of information and communication technologies in critical research. Here the educator emerges as a protagonist in a transformative process, as one who questions, analyses, argues and as one who advocates educational aims based upon an ideal notion of an authentic, inclusive, and just education in a high tech environment.

This collection of essays is divided in two main parts: Part I, Rethinking Teaching and Learning and Part II, Contrasting Analytical Approaches to the Integration of Information and Communication Technologies in Higher Education.

Part I shows the authors' commitment to collaborative learning, to assorted dimensions of technologically-mediated learning, and to the always pertinent concern with reflective practice. Prominent in this context are issues of accessibility for students with disabilities in the mediated educational world (info-exclusion) and important or desirable individual goals of learners, such as self-regulation and self-sustainable alternative development in a projected new educational scene.

This first part is led by Thérèse Laferrière's paper, "Les communautés d'apprenants en réseau au bénéfice de l'éducation" (The networked learning community serving education). It consists of a reflection grounded in the author's practice and her research on the contribution of information and communication technologies to teaching and learning in teacher preparation. This piece of reflective wisdom is followed by "The design of computer-supported collaborative learning environment in higher education", which focuses on the design of the environmental conditions to promote collaborative mediated processes and knowledge building. The authors Begonia Gros, Vania Guerra, and Javier Sánchez provide a meaningful field analysis of the results of the use of the Knowledge Forum program as a support in collaborative learning processes in higher education. The authors conclude that the experience led to new lines of research and they explain how the unit of analysis shifted from being the individual or the group to that of activity systems.

Carmen Alba Pastor, in her paper "Educación superior sin barreras: La accesibilidad de las universidades para los estudiantes con discapacidad" (Higher education without barriers: Issues of accessibility for students with disabilities), calls our attention to the low degree of accessibility of computer-mediated university programs for students with disabilities, which runs the risk of creating a new kind of segregation. Joaquín García Carrasco's contribution "Praxis reflexiva en los espacios virtuales de formación" (Reflexive praxis in virtual formative spaces) makes an argument for pedagogical reflection. On a different note, Beatriz Fainholc, in her paper "Teaching and learning in the knowledge society," takes a holistic approach to teaching and learning. The author sets major democratic transformative aims such as improvement of quality of life through flexible structures, open minds, and equitable ethical values at the core of a knowledge society. Her paper provides a multidimensional synthesis that embodies an Argentinian intellectual tradition that has been somewhat neglected in our milieu.

Part II opens with Denise Stockley's paper entitled "Guidelines to the edge: Integrating information and communication technologies in education". As a practitioner with daily involvement in the improvement of teaching and learning at the tertiary level, and as a consultant on technological integration, she asserts the need for integrating information and communication technologies at universities. The guidelines for integration that Stockley offers to administrators have the potential to influence strategic planning discussions on educational technology. Part II closes with Jamie-Lynn Magnusson's critical paper "Information and communications technology: Plugging Ontario higher education into the knowledge society." Magnusson makes use of discursive theory (mainly as defined by Jacob Torfing) to illustrate how the information and communication technology and knowledge society discourse legitimizes neo-liberal reforms to higher education; the latter in her view aims at insertion in international markets. The strategies used to "plug Ontario [Canada] into the Knowledge Society" reveals, she asserts, how the General Agreement on Trade and Services and the World Trade Organization work in local jurisdictions. She provides reasons to explain why a public protective of public service accepted the idea of massive neo-liberal reforms leading to marketization and consequent privatization.

The various papers, although different in orientation, cover a wide range of issues that should lead to further discussion on several matters of concern, including the following topics of relevance: a) universal usability as a basic condition to integration and to the fostering of distributed systems of knowledge; b) the rethinking of the ethical dimension of teaching and learning in the new and changing context; and c) the need to embrace critical multi-media literacy in the context of the pursuit of a meaningful democratic learning environment and a sustainable civil society.¹

We trust that the readers will find this scholarly volume both interesting and inspiring.