

## THE CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM: THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF THE INTERNET

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**ABSTRACT.** The startling impact of technological change on humanities and literary study brought both anxiety and enthusiasm. The postmodern conception on education meant a shift from printed texts to electronic ones, or hypertexts. The focus on restructuring old forms of learning and the orientation towards an interactive educational process are two consequences of the postmodern understanding of pedagogy. The Internet perceived as an educational framework proves to be a challenging alternative to traditional pedagogical models. The present paper attempts to shed light on the most important aspects of hypertext, analyzing its advantages as well as its shortcomings. It will also focus on the major roles of the World Wide Web in education: the Internet as archive, tutor, publishing house, forum and navigator. Finally, a commentary on the consequences of using technology in the educational process will be provided, taking into account the viability of such an enterprise within the Romanian system.

### ПРЕДИЗВИКАТЕЛСТВОТО НА ПОСТМОДЕРНИЗМА: РОЛЯТА НА ИНТЕРНЕТ В ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО

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**РЕЗЮМЕ.** Изненадващото въздействие на технологичните промени върху хуманитарното и филологическо обучение доведе едновременно до тревога и ентузиазъм. Постмодерната идея при образованието се заключава в смяна на печатните текстове с електронни такива или хипертекстове.

Фокусиране на вниманието към реструктуриране на старите форми на обучение и ориентирането им към интерактивен образователен процес са двете следствия от постмодерното разбиране за педагогика. Интернетът, възприет като образователна структура доказва, че е предизвикателната алтернатива на традиционни педагогически модели. Настоящият доклад прави опит да изясни най-важните аспекти на хипертекстът, анализирайки неговите преимущества и недостатъци. Спира се също така и върху основната роля на Интернет в образованието: интернет като архиватор, преподавател, издателска къща, форум и навигатор. В заключение е обобщено полезността от използването на глобалната мрежа в образователния процес, което ще бъде доказано, вземайки под внимание жизнеспособността на такова начинание в румънската система.

### Introduction

Major changes in the form of knowledge and information are taking place. Whether the phrase *postmodern education* can be accepted or not, it is nonetheless true that there is a general tendency to restructure old forms of instruction, by adapting them to contemporary realities.

The task of this piece of work is twofold: firstly, it attempts to provide a general theoretical outlook of what is understood as postmodern education; secondly, it investigates the educational roles of the Internet within the general framework previously sketched. The connection between the two parts will be made through the analysis of a central concept for the present discussion: the hypertext. The final part of the article will provide an evaluation of the viability of such an enterprise within the Romanian contemporary educational system.

### Postmodernism and Postmodernity

The term *postmodernism* has brought about tremendous controversy and spirited debate. Is it an idea? A cultural experience? The result of our imagination? A parody? Is it even real?, one might ask. Regardless of the types of answers

to these questions, the undeniable reality is that postmodernism is a phenomenon that under no circumstances can be ignored.

Authors like David Lyon (1998) draw attention to the distinction between *postmodernism* as referring to cultural aspects and *postmodernity* as referring to social realities. A short and inevitably scant investigation of the two concepts will prove helpful for the present account.

*Postmodernism* I highly suspicious and critical of the former models of cultural, social and political perceptions; it is undoubtedly the expression of a crisis in the hierarchies instituted by the modern era. Postmodernism raises attention to the fact that there is something irremediably wrong with the modern patterns established by Enlightenment; not only does it attempt to signal that modern values lack support in reality – by rejecting the fundamental idea that human rationality can produce freedom – but it proceeds to a deconstructive “transcription” of these values. For postmodernists, knowledge is neither eternal, nor universal. Knowledge is the product of an interaction of our ideas about the world and our experience of the world; thus, knowledge is a process of creation, a “personal narrative”. Postmodernism challenges convention, accepts

ambiguity, values diversity, prefers the particular to the general, and stresses the constructedness of reality. Postmodernist doctrines and practices range from progressive to conservative, from avant garde to poststructuralist, from “of resistance” to “of reaction”. Regardless of its definition, its nuances and accents, postmodernism as a general cultural tendency is guided by the phrase “Anything goes”, seeking legitimacy in pluralism, difference, fragmentation, preoccupation towards surface, cynicism of old practices, rejection of universalism and fundamentalism (science is no longer perceived as being built on a solid base of perceivable facts). It shifts its attention from the printed word (logocentrism) to the video image (iconocentrism).

*Postmodernity*, as a social phenomenon, departs from the same premises, but concentrates on two coordinates: firstly, on the development of the information technologies and communication (intimately related to globalization); and secondly, on consumerism. It focuses on social change, orienting its attention to postindustrialism and consumerist capitalism. There is a suspicion, however, coming from Lyotard, that the progress in knowledge under the form of the computerization of society is unable to determine an authentic progress in science and in technology.

Having outlined the concepts in use, we shall proceed at this point to reveal the meanings of postmodern education.

## What Is Postmodern Education?

The most important feature of postmodern education is that the teacher-centered classroom is replaced with the student-centered environment. There is a general concern that the managerial framework of the school tends to replace the traditional conception of education as pedagogy. Within the managerial school both the roles of the teacher and of the student, as well as the relation between them undergo fundamental changes such as the perception of the teacher as the administrator of information and of the students’ abilities, the perception of the student as the passive agent who receives information, and the perception of the teacher-student relationship as purely contractual.

As a reaction against managerial education, postmodernism found its own expression. There are several general features of postmodern pedagogy, well underlined by Grace Ann Rosile and David Boje (cited by Stan, E., 2004): it is self-reflexive, decentered, deconstructive, non-totalitarian and non-universalist, and, finally, it supports the imperative of adding what is characteristic of one’s own self.

The *self-reflexiveness* of postmodern pedagogy means that it is suspicious of characteristic invariants such as the couple power-knowledge; power structures are consolidated and perpetuated by the control over sources of knowledge. The school promotes knowledge as paradigm. Pedagogy is the power instrument that configures the individuals’ beliefs and values, image of the world and of the others, their personal perceptions of what knowledge, truth, and principles mean. Therefore, pedagogy viewed from a postmodern perspective promotes a type of engaged skepticism towards its own foundations.

Postmodern pedagogy is *decentered* by rejecting normativism and fundamentalist hierarchies within the couple power-knowledge. Decentered pedagogy seeks to eliminate authority and obedient relationships within the school environment. It promotes student-centered classrooms through a re-evaluation of the role of the teacher, not by rendering the teacher useless, but by defining him/her as a co-participative authority that plays the role of facilitator. The concept of authority one has in mind when referring to postmodern education is reciprocal authority: teaching and learning is perceived as a dialogue – both the student and the teacher learn from one another.

*Deconstructivism* in education refers to rejecting a certain type of methodological perspective, namely the scientific-experimental one, by questioning its premises and content. Postmodern education aims at deconstructing the concepts of reality, truth, knowledge, interaction. Within the deconstructive method stress is placed on dual research (making up lists of bipolar terms), reinterpretation (interpretation followed by alternative interpretation of the same event), rebel voices (discovering the dominant and the subordinate, as well as the silent voices in a narrative), the other side of the story (the marginalized, the hidden one), negation of the subject (having the opposed view on the story), exceptions, reading between the lines.

Postmodern education is *non-totalitarian and non-universalist* by renouncing at the meta-narratives (*grands récits*) and accepting the relativism of local stories and of partial truths. Totalitarian perceptions promote hierarchical, dominant systems based on the power-knowledge relation that annihilate alterity, locality and particularity. Therefore, students must be seen not as the inferior and ignorant individuals that have to conform to universal teaching methods, but as individuals with different stories, interests and needs, who require diverse educational methods.

The consequence of the previous four characteristics of the postmodern pedagogy is that it promotes the imperative of adding what is characteristic of one’s own self to the learning-teaching process. This imperative is defined by three main ideas: firstly, facilitating the active creation instead of efficiently adapting to reality (if reality is not absolute, but our own creation, then education must be understood as the art of choosing between options); secondly, there is on “right” answer – the student must not seek certitude, but value ambiguity; thirdly, rejecting hierarchies.

The actors of the educational process represent a crucial aspect to be investigated. In the following paragraphs we will take a glance at the roles of the teacher and of the student within the paradigm of postmodern education and we will also attempt to shed light on the kind of relationship that binds the two.

## The Teacher’s Journey towards the Borders and the Student’s Journey towards the Center

The characteristics of the teacher prescribed by modernity seem nothing but anachronic today; the teacher is no longer perceived as the center of knowledge, the omniscient authority, the illuminating source, the undisputable origin of truth.

There is an eloquent analogy proposed by Pauline Marie Rosenau (1992) of the trio teacher-student-lesson with the trio author-reader-text. In her view, postmodernism shifts its attention from the author/teacher to the couple reader/student-text/lesson. The modern conception of the author as the ultimate authority with regard to his/her own text, legitimated by the fact that he/she is the initiator and the key to its real meaning, is rejected. The author is no longer the sole entity that can decide where the truth lies; he/she is no longer perceived as the "legislator", the "patriarch", the "arbitrator". Similarly, the teacher does not represent the individual in hold of the whole, undeniable truth who is the only one apt to evaluate if the student has advanced in knowledge. By rejecting the central role of the teacher, postmodernists also reject any privileged position with respect to the meaning of the lesson – there is no way to decide between right and wrong, between truth and falseness; moreover, the mere concepts of good, truth, etc. are denied their ontological foundation and their uniqueness.

It is a process of de-legitimatization of the teacher that the postmodernists propose by re-evaluating his/her role and by rejecting his/her authority. The causal relation binding the author to his/her text (read: teacher-lesson) is thus dissolved. Structuralism holds that the text is the result of a context and not of a certain creator; the text lives a life of its own, independent of its originator. The relativization of the author's position leaves him/her with the sole role of interpreter. The teacher as interpreter represents the negation of the quality of agent and authority.

The student is perceived as a center of intentions, interests and activities; the student is thus a *performative* agent. From this point of view, the postmodern model of classroom is student-centered; it enables students to construct knowledge rather than to assimilate and reproduce the information controlled by the teacher.

In his/her role as *facilitator*, the teacher must encourage students to value ideas such as diversity (each culture and each individual have particular tastes, values, ways of life that should be preserved and appreciated as such); equality (especially with respect to power); tolerance (not criticizing marginalized groups); freedom (the right to express oneself); creativity (constructing reality; affirmative right to diverse perspectives and values); emotions (self-esteem strengthening); intuition (as opposed to rationality).

### **Authority in the Teacher-Student Relationship**

The poststructuralist/deconstructivist theory of Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) states that teachers cannot use their authority to promote dialogue with their students. She rejects the so-called "emancipatory authority" (term introduced by Paulo Freire), having in mind a limited role for the teacher who can only assure a space of meeting for oppositional groups. Ellsworth's argument is supported by the belief that various groups have different types of knowledge that are inaccessible to one another.

Unconvinced by Ellsworth's pessimistic approach, Clive Beck (1994) proposes a solution to the teacher-student relationship in the following terms: along with the authority of the teacher (confined to very little, as we have seen), there is a legitimate

student authority; this allows us to talk about *reciprocal authority*.

Teaching and learning are processes that meet under the form of a dialogue. Teachers and students do learn together. Reciprocal authority, however, does not entail epistemic egalitarianism (as rejected by Bochenski, 1992); it only institutes another type of relationship, namely, the *communicative pedagogy* (as described by Gert Biesta, 1995).

Communicative pedagogy has two variants: an ethical one and an empirical one.

*Ethical communicative pedagogy* is, essentially, dialogue. As Nicholas Burbules (1994) maintains, the educational dialogue requires two premises: engagement of actors and communicative virtues (such as tolerance, patience, openness, acceptance).

*Empirical communicative pedagogy* departs from the idea that education is indeed communication (not only it is supposed to be so).

The difference between the two variants lies in language – the first one bases intersubjectivity on subjectivity, while the other bases subjectivity on intersubjectivity.

At this point, we propose to attack the concept of hypertext as intimately connected to postmodernist education. The analysis of the concept, as well as its advantages and shortcomings is intended to be a unifying element between the theoretical framework sketched until now and the more practical issues about the instructive roles of the Internet that will be discussed later.

### **Who's Afraid of Hypertext?**

Hypertext is a type of computer application which uses the technology to enable readers to pick and choose fragments of text. It refers to a wide range of computer applications such as interactive books, encyclopedias, online reference indexes, and other forms of nonlinear reading and writing which are created by means of computer technology. It represents a way of organizing information and navigating through electronic texts stored on individual computers and networks. As a non-sequential form of composing and writing, it enables the reader to use a *hyper-reading* style by jumping from page to page.

The concept of hypertext first came into limelight in 1945, when Vannevar Bush claimed that new methods for reading and annotating research papers, books, and scientific records represented an authentic need. It was Theodore Nelson's turn, in the 1960s, to nominate the newly invented non-sequential reading and writing displayed on a computer screen; the word *hypertext* became the denominator of electronic links or branches interactively connecting digital texts. When selecting a highlighted object (text, picture, program, etc.), readers can view the other objects linked to it, being able to move from one another according to their interests. Keyword links connect the documents into an associative information web that is not randomly organized, but structured and systematical.

Hypertext fosters a literacy that promotes abilities like intuition and association. Thus, students must learn to navigate and explore the text rather than follow a single path. They are no longer perceived as “passive” receivers of information, but as active information explorers.

The new information technologies have facilitated controversial debates over issues like the anachronism of printed material, leading to the anxious fear that we will come to the point where books will simply disappear. However exciting these topics might be to discuss, it is not our aim here to proceed to such an analysis. The point of interest in this particular context is to find those precise elements that connect hypertext to postmodern education. Consequently, we will focus on the advantages of hypertext for an enriched educational environment, taking also into account its limitations.

### Advantages

Once the student has learnt how to navigate through electronic space, a whole new world of possibilities is opened to him/her. By creating a new type of reading and writing environment, hypertext fosters a wide range of abilities that enable students to learn in a more pleasant, faster and better way.

Firstly, hypertext encourages critical thinking skills. When confronted with a number of links to texts on various subjects related or not to the topic of departure, students must learn to make their choices according to their particular interests. This requires discipline and the ability to select information in a critical manner. It is essentially a process of decision-making that empowers students with a more dynamic role than it is possible with traditional textbooks. Learning with hypertext becomes more student-centered because the emphasis of hypertext is on a mentally active reader. From this point of view, hypertext systems are generally called learning systems, rather than teaching systems.

Secondly, since students are provided with both visual and verbal information on a topic (*hypermedia*), they are able to come to a more thorough understanding of the material.

Thirdly, electronic texts promote independence: once students become familiar to browsing and Internet navigation, they can use them as methods of self-study; they are no longer dependant on teachers for certain activities that can be carried out at home or in extra-school environments.

Moreover, hypertext relates to one of the fundamental postmodern ideas, namely that of having in mind multiple points of view. Having access to a wide range of texts and being able to select them by topic (or by any other criterion), the reader is provided with a number of different perspectives on the same subject of interest. With the help of a critical and analytical mind, the reader can make the best of this kind of variety.

Also, the electronic text is volatile and open-ended. The phrase “work in progress” becomes legitimate in any hypertextual experience. Hypertext need never be complete. There is a type of flexibility in the form of information that only computerization can assure.

Finally, hypertext encourages decentralization of information. The postmodern student must be in search of multiple “centers”. He or she is prompted to find, investigate information and then order it in his/her own manner.

### Limitations

Despite its undeniable advantages for creating a new type of interactive learning and reading experience, hypertext can easily represent a barrier to those who are not familiar with the technology. In fact, having the computerized technology accessible – both physically and in terms of skills – is the necessary and sufficient condition needed to proceed forward.

Hypertext requires that students be familiar to computers and know how to work with electronic text. They must be open to interactive reading, to navigating and to choosing proper paths within the text.

By stressing an exploratory type of learning, hypertext can also become a difficult tool for those students that cannot assess the information correctly in order to best fit their punctual interests. They can easily get confused and disoriented – indeed “lost” – by choosing wrong paths for their inquiry.

It is also a fact that the structure of hypertext might not meet the needs and expectations of a particular user. He or she might find a certain arrangement of links or paths confusing; thus, the user will have problems in identifying the right path to his or her subject of interest.

A low ability of using a Web browser as well as hypertext itself can generate frustration. It is acknowledged that hypertext reading ability is related to spatial reasoning ability. A multitude of feelings might be experienced by the user under the form of wasting time over useless information, “getting lost” or simply poring their eyes out.

Once they overcome the barriers of hypertext, students as well as teachers find themselves part of a new type of literacy experience. The Internet and the electronic text provide students with the major benefit of playing an active role of information explorers.

### The Educational Role of the Internet

In an attempt to debunk the traditional notion of the passive classroom environment, people have become ever more interested in the proper ways to bring the computerized technologies into the school. Postmodern education means education reform; the latter is guided by the general feeling that passive learning doesn't work, yet interactive learning works wonders. Postmodern education stresses the positive nature of interactive learning. Interactivity seems to be the word of the day.

Our aim here is to discover the potential educational role of the Internet within the classroom. Therefore, we will focus on five major roles that the Internet takes on in relationship to education – the Internet as navigator, archive, tutor, forum, and publishing house.

### **The Internet as Navigator**

It is a general and indubitable truth that the Internet is an international informational lattice. Disposing of a multitude of search engines (the most popular being Yahoo!, Google, AltaVista, and so on) that can track down any type of information on billions of Web sites, the World Wide Web is equivalent to a World Wide Library Catalogue.

Typing a word and clicking a button opens up a world of information that may be both excitingly helpful and anxiously overloading. Indeed, skeptics use the word "overload" as their weapon.

In order to help people manage in the vast sea of information, resource cataloging is oriented towards developing annotative resource guides, where sites are divided into domains and subjects. For example, educational sites, as one category of the many, can be browsed by using keywords like primary school or secondary, foreign languages or mathematics, geography or physics, H<sub>2</sub>O or holiday carols.

### **The Internet as Archive**

The World Wide Web can be defined, actually, as an archive of archives. The great ambition of our days is to integrate the resources of all libraries, museums, and resource centers in a system that allows all individuals to have unlimited access no matter where they reside.

The software and hardware tools that can make this ambition become reality are developing with each day that passes. Steps have been taken so far, but there is still much left to do.

Transforming paper-based archives into electronic forms, both textual and graphical, is one important point. Scholars using the new information technologies are still dependant on traditional bibliographical tools. The task of digitizing the existent archives is indeed enormous – but nonetheless highly useful.

### **The Internet as Tutor**

The World Wide Web's ability to present information clearly, attractively and practically transforms it in a perfect framework within which tutorials can be designed. Adapting hypertext to the educational curriculum is convenient due to the lucid and logical manner in which enormous amounts of information can be organized by using highlighted keywords, clickable graphics, hypermedia elements, and menus. A variety of subjects – from literature to maths, from history to biology and from music to chemistry – can take the form of on-line lessons.

Departing from a Socratic premise – that learning should be based on questions – the Web provides a good environment for interaction between students and teachers. Take the case of a timid student that lacks the courage to ask questions in front of all his/her colleagues and you can see its benefits right away.

### **The Internet as Forum**

The role of the Internet as a forum of discussions may be integrated in its role as tutor. Registration to an e-mail account or to a listserv (automatic mailing program) is necessary for the teacher and the student to exchange questions and other information outside of the classroom.

On-line class forums represent a marketplace of ideas and information, a virtual environment of debate and discovery, a space where cyberpersonal communication is possible.

Educational forums as an archive of discussions may be used by teachers as an extra assessment tool of the intellectual abilities of their students. The user-friendly environment provided by on-line forums can represent a space of dialogue for everyone.

### **The Internet as Publishing House**

The World-Wide Web presents an excellent medium for students to organize and publish their own projects, portfolios and journals. The Web can serve students as a publishing tool for their classroom work; they can design on-line multimedia projects using clickable images, interactive tables and graphics. Moreover, school journalism is also encouraged; students of all ages are publishing exciting on-line magazines and journals.

### **Romania: Where It Stands**

Bearing into mind all the aspects discussed so far about the fundamental ideas of postmodern education, as well as about the instructive roles that the Internet might play within contemporary education, we feel indebted to take a short glance at the palpable reality of Romanian educational system and its relation to the issues analyzed.

If at the university education level we can talk about a satisfying degree of Internet access (all important Romanian Universities have their own Internet sites that provide prospective and existent students with information regarding the course offer available, staff, upcoming events, and so on), primary and secondary education have restricted access to computerized technology mainly due to lack of funds.

Consequently, institutional access to the computerized technology and to the Internet must increase dramatically. Internet providers should offer Web access at reasonable rates, and more importantly, they must offer schools and classrooms server accounts so they may publish Web sites of their own. Moreover, community members that have access and experience in the field should offer their assistance to school staff and students in order to learn how to use this type of technology.

### **Conclusion**

As a final remark, we cannot ignore the fact that within the educational framework the new information technologies represent an invaluable tool for providing active collaborative learning and assessment. Students may use word-processing programs to develop their writing and publishing skills; e-mail and forums provide them with the evaluation of their opinions and ideas made by teachers and colleagues; multimedia programs offer them inquiry-based learning for projects and other school activities. The teacher is also assisted by the Internet in his/her task of offering individualized support to and evaluation of students.

Postmodern education, on the other hand, can be perceived as a method of re-inventing education for the XXIst century. Although postmodernist ideas appeared in the 60s, it is nonetheless true that they can be thought as legitimate premises of a new and refreshing curricular reform.

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