

Entrevista

Kurt Meredith

As relações entre Educação, Democracia e Cidadania são muito caras a quem pesquisa as instituições, os processos e as práticas educativas. Cada vez mais se fala em inserção social dos pesquisadores da área e de atuações concretas nos cenários de sociedades emergentes e em desenvolvimento. A Educação tem o papel de formar cidadãos? Ela pode contribuir para o alastramento e a efetivação de conceitos como os de Cidadania? Evidentemente, essas não são questões simples de se responder. No entanto, há quem as enfrente cotidianamente.

É o caso do Professor Kurt Meredith, do Office of Education for Democracy da University of Northern Iowa, Estados Unidos. Em março, ele esteve na UNIVALI para falar de um programa para a reforma da prática instrucional com foco no letramento através dos vários níveis de escolaridade, conteúdo e cultura. A CONTRAPONOTOS não perdeu a oportunidade de inquiri-lo sobre aspectos tão instigantes e envolventes, como o letramento para o pensamento crítico.

Para este entrevista, contamos com a contribuição das professoras Elizabeth da Costa Gama, coordenadora de Assuntos Internacionais da UNIVALI, e Solange Puntel Mostafa, pesquisadora do Mestrado em Educação (PMAE), a quem a CONTRAPONOTOS agradece.

CONTRAPONOTOS - What is education for democracy?

KURT MEREDITH - When I speak about education for democracy I am speaking more about the act of teaching than I am about the content taught. Education for democracy is really about providing a classroom instructional context that enables students to live and learn within a community that embodies the fundamental qualities of a successful democratic society. A democratic classroom then is one that promotes a set of behaviors, that provide a set of experiences, and presents a context for thinking and learning that supports a robust democratic life. Such a classroom offers all students an equal voice and equal access to learning opportunities.

I say this in the same sense as Freire when he speaks about the liberating educator. Teachers must remain involved as they lead students toward democratic expression but that involvement ranges from intense to peripheral as students grow. Ira Shor (1982) wrote about “the withering away of the teacher,” which means that while the teacher is indispensable as a change agent, he/she should engage students in meaningful learning, with scaffolding, and gradually pull back, turning the necessary power over students to construct knowledge. Beyond this, the classroom must provide the opportunities for students to work independently and collaboratively to experience both means of problem solving. Democratic classrooms promote independent inquiry and the use of multiple information sources and resources in the process of forming independent opinions. Democratic classrooms hold high expectations for student engagement as part of a larger expectation for student responsibility to the mission of the classroom and to their own thoughts, actions, and learning. Such classrooms promote respect for the culture, context and perspectives of others. They offer students a relatively risk free environment (within the context of student responsibility for self and others), open to speculative thinking and to the possibilities of making and correcting mistakes.

CONTRAPONOTOS - What is the scope of the program of Education for Democracy?

KURT MEREDITH - The Orava Project begun under the co-directorship of myself and Dr. Jeannie Steele was quite comprehensive in nature. We worked with classroom teachers and administrators, the Ministry of Education, university teacher preparation faculty and College Deans, State school inspectors, early childhood centers, NGOs, parents, librarians, technical support people, professional development organizations and others in the education community to deliver a comprehensive programs of educational restructuring. The RWCT program spun off this original program and was more focused on classroom teachers and school administrators. The RWCT program has been implemented in 32 countries world-wide.

CONTRAPONOTOS - The learning theories you mentioned at UNIVALI (schemas,

prior knowledge, etc.) are well known in Brazil. Are they unknown in the East European countries visited by you?

KURT MEREDITH - As we implemented our program we recognized that there was likely to be great overlap in knowledge among professional educators. It has always been our view that as we approach reform we are working with highly educated, well informed caring professionals whose knowledge base is deep and an invaluable resource for the change process. our Eastern European colleagues certainly were in this category. It is true that due to variability in access to Western materials from country to country in the former Soviet sphere there were some gaps in information we were able to fill but this was the exception more than the rule. What we try to bring to the discussion is new and different ways to make use of what we know about thinking and learning and democratic classrooms in real and practical term. In so doing we are giving teachers implementable approaches they can incorporate directly into their instruction immediately to see how their students react. We always strongly encourage teachers to engage in trial implementations as the program progresses so they can share their own experiences with their colleagues. This enables them to get immediate feedback so they can modify implementation when necessary to make sure what they are doing is successful. It is always useful to work within teacher communities because the collective wisdom about teaching and learning always improves on what we offer directly.

CONTRAPONOTOS - Students of education have more difficulties to establish relationships between cultural phenomena than students from other areas. What do you assign these difficulties to?

KURT MEREDITH - I am not certain I agree with this statement. I see education students speaking together across cultures quite successfully. Often there is variability in the details of educational delivery and even in expected outcomes but the fundamentals of teaching and learning and the basic belief in providing young people the best possible educational experience seems universal.

CONTRAPONOTOS - You used a poem (mother goose) in your presentation at

UNIVALI aiming to demonstrate the need to develop critical thinking among teachers. Would you say that critical thinking could be developed by intuition as well, that kind of intuition used in artistic creation?

KURT MEREDITH - I do think there are those who come to critical thought more naturally than others. However, the classroom is an artificial environment in a sense and has considerable influence over what student value and how they think. There is sufficient research support suggesting that students quickly learn what is expected of them in class and engage in those activities that will enable them to be successful in that particular classroom for that particular teacher. So if classrooms and teachers de-emphasize critical thought and require students to engage in lower level thinking two things occur. First students' value structure is altered away from regarding critical thought as important to seeing lower level thought processes as more important. Second, any kind of thought processes need practice in order to perform well. If classrooms only offer students one or only a few ways of thinking students will become practiced in those and lose the capacity to think well in other ways. So for even those for whom critical thought comes more naturally, years of classroom thinking directed at lower levels form of thought will leave students far less able to think at higher levels and far less inclined to value higher level thinking.

CONTRAPONOTOS - Finally, we would like to mention the educator Paulo Freire and his concept of 'questioning' the world and ask you about the theoretical foundations of the project on Education for Democracy? Could you say something about it?

KURT MEREDITH - The model we have implemented through the various programs we co-authored draws from a number of educators and learning theorists, including Paulo Freire and Maxine Greene as well as John Dewey and Vygotsky. We have also incorporated much we have learned from the hundreds, if not, thousands of teachers we have had the privilege to work with over many years. We have turned to the writings of many critical literacy theorists in the development of the fundamental framework we reference in support of instruction. We have not chosen a single theorist to follow but have relied on the research of many who have examined ways of facilitating critical

inquiry in classrooms, the means of engaging students actively in their learning. With my psychology background I have also enjoyed the work of many attribution researchers beginning with the works of Fritz Heider, John Harvey, Bernard Weiner, Carol Dweck, and others.