

➤ Foreword

Manuel Pinto

Full professor and researcher, University of Minho, Portugal

LITERACY TO NAVIGATE

In times past, learning to read, write and do arithmetic was to get on course to earn the “writ of emancipation” in society. These skills are still essential today, but are not enough to live in society. Reading and critically understanding the world we live in, with all its complexity, difficulties and challenges, require not only other skills (learning to search for and validate information, reading with new codes and grammar, etc) but, to a certain extent, also metaskills, matrixes and mechanisms that are transversal to the different and new literacies, are necessary. They are needed not just to interpret but equally to communicate and participate in the little worlds that make up our everyday activities as well as, in a broader sense, in the world of the *polis*, which today is a global world.

These tools- cultural compasses and GPS, maps and mappings- which one must learn to use if not build, increasingly intersect with the (old and new) media, social networks, digital platforms and applications. At first sight we are dazzled by the performativity of the machines and gadgets and by the promise that they are self-sufficient to solve life’s problems. Technologies are presented to us as a fact and not as a possibly problematic social construction, both in terms of their creation and affirmation and in the way they position themselves in relation to their potential users.

However, the machines and their resources appear, develop and perish at breathtaking speed, feeding the global market and attracting powerful economic interests. In fact they are not just economic: from the standpoint of educational and cultural policies, it is easier to develop initiatives around something which draws attention and has symbolic capital (associated to “innovation”, the “modernising and transforming power” of technology...) than to bank on something which, immaterial as it is, is more striking and long-lasting: training, reflectiveness and acquiring communicative skills.

This does not mean that technology can or should be opposed to education. The latter needs the former, more so today than yesterday. But one should not lose sight of the hierarchy which is at play here: the lead should be taken by the goals for the citizens’ cultural development. From this point of view, technology is instrumental and should itself be the aim and focus of research. People come first, and all resources, digital and analogical, that contribute to the broader purpose should be mobilised.

These thoughts are relevant when considering the project “Navigating with Magalhães: Study on the impact of digital media on children”, which was developed between 2010 and 2013 by the Communication and Society Research Centre of the University of Minho, coordinated by Professor Sara Pereira and funded by the *Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia*. The aim of the study was to ascertain and assess the impact of the “eEscolinha” measure of the Technological Plan for Education (2008-2011), with particular emphasis on how it was implemented in the field, i.e., in schools and families.

The way this measure came about did not conceal either the philosophy or the ambition behind it. It arose not from the Ministry of Education or with its major contribution or involvement as would be expected but, instead, from the Ministry of Economy, and its ultimate purpose was enlightening: “to place Portugal among the five most advanced European countries in terms of school’s technological modernisation.” In the media, the message that was conveyed was one of a strong governmental commitment to the programme, which consisted above all in the delivery of the laptop Magalhães at a very affordable price or even free of charge. It is true that, according to 2011 data of the EU Kids Online

project, Portugal moved to the number one position at EU level in terms of personal computer ownership (65 and 24% respectively) and of internet access in the bedroom in the 9-16 age group (67 and 49% respectively). If access were in fact to have solved the essential issue, the scenario would undoubtedly be exciting.

In fact, nobody with any common sense will question the worthy political effort to facilitate the access to and the use of computers and the Internet from an early age (a measure with a similar purpose was launched in Portugal for adults involved in improving their academic qualifications). But investment in the dissemination of information and communication technologies disconnected from other components, such as teacher training, media education, curriculum integration and others, will inevitably mean that local circumstances will be left with major challenge of assigning educational and cultural scope to a tool which, when regarded as the centre and the object, only by chance will be a significant part of learning processes.

These topics were ultimately present at the time of the launch of the “Navigating with Magalhães” project. At least they provided a context for observing what, after all, did go on in classrooms when the blue and white box, so successful both domestically and internationally, was widely introduced

Not meaning to reveal the findings, and actually inviting the reader to discover them by reading the chapters comprising this book, one can nonetheless say that the political vicissitudes that led to the change in government in 2011 also entailed the end of the Technological Plan for Education and, consequently, that of the eEscolinha. In other words, instead of conducting an evaluation so as to correct what had been done wrong or bring in what was missing, the option was a measure which was both extreme and blind. Having to choose between going with something that may have been ill designed or doing nothing, the choice was to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Paraphrasing Dickens in a “Tale of Two Cities”, we live simultaneously in the best and the worst of times, in an era of both wisdom and foolishness. We have performative tools, but we forget that without the contribution and participation of the social agents in the field, there is no measure, no matter how enlightened it may be, that will yield good results.

It seems the time has come to think about what was done and to resume an interrupted journey by redesigning along new lines. It's a journey that has to be centred not on technologies but on people; no on the market, but on educational institutions, not on quantity but on quality and by placing pedagogical and cultural criteria at the fore of any measures to be taken. The 21st century citizen is not one who owns technology but rather one who can understand them and use them in order to take advantage of them to address the challenges life has to offer. We are travellers in these times, But first of all we need to ask ourselves where we want to go. Only after the direction has been set, does it make sense to think of the tools that may guide us. This book may be a contribution to a movement in that direction.