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**CO-OPERATION AND CO-CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH
FREE EXPRESSION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF FREINET'S PEDAGOGY****Fotini Dimopoulou* & Marilena Georganta***

ABSTRACT

Writing may be considered as a form of art, created by people for people. Texts can convey different meanings, reflect deep emotions, represent actions and decisions, and inform us of facts that took place long time ago or at present. Undoubtedly, this technique can be relieving, informative, liberating as well as revolutionary. The so called 'Free texts' in Freinet Pedagogy invite children to co-create knowledge by experiencing the world. Freinet Pedagogy is considered to be a complete form of progressive education. As a result, action and production-oriented teaching and

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learning strategies were developed and shared with other people. By employing these teaching and learning strategies, children can actively discover the world and reach self-development. Emphasis is laid on expression, communication and co-operation skills, so that children can experience democracy, co-sharing their environment with their actions. Free texts also allow students to use their imagination and produce spontaneous texts without being restricted to a specific topic. They start writing and, little by little, learn how to write. Free text, combined with the school newspaper and correspondence, allows them to rediscover the meaning of written communication and also offers the possibility to co-construct knowledge. Freinet considered these texts to be visual, as well as very important evidence of a manifestation of creativity, imagination, and exploration that is inherent in a child. The process may take place at a particular time during the lesson. As soon as the students finish writing, the process of reading, listening to the written texts, accompanied by drawings on the board, starts. Finally, they vote for the story they liked most, make corrections together and share with the community. Consequently, students are able to collaborate, exchange ideas and co-construct their path towards learning. Children take on roles and participate actively. Participants take part in the process and create 'free texts', following the principles of communication, freedom of expression and collaboration. A simulation of the whole process will take place as it happens in a classroom.

Keywords: freinet Pedagogy, 'free texts', co-operation, co-construction, democracy, co-sharing

Introduction

We took the initiative to participate in the conference entitled 'Educational commons and active social inclusion' organized by the European Union-funded research project SMOOTH.

We strongly believe that there is a connection between free texts - one of Celestin Freinet's techniques - as a form of expression and interaction and educational commons as an opportunity offered to exchange ideas, make proposals, take action so that changes can be implemented.

We are both members of The Pedagogical Group called 'Skasiarheio'. It is about an attempt to create a free and democratic Community School through experimental exploration. More specifically, people from the field of Education, Health, Culture, and Arts are gathered in order to contribute with their expertise to our long-term goal. Our group is mainly made up of teachers from Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education. Its members promote Celestin Freinet's cooperative pedagogy, exchange views, ideas and proposals for a public school that is democratic, cooperative, compensatory in its inequalities and political in its characteristics, for a Community School where criticism and institutional pedagogy will find its place. One of our major concerns is engaging all children in the teaching and learning process, as well as creating, getting to know the history of the neighborhood and its connection with international history from a global perspective, expressing and communicating freely.

Freinet was the fifth born of eight children in Provence. His own schooldays were extremely unpleasant to him, affecting his teaching methods and desire for reform. In 1915 he was recruited to the French army and suffered a lung injury. He never made a full recovery, and as a result he suffered throughout his life from a shortness of breath. This fact was partly responsible for the nature of his educational innovations where pupil activities replaced the habitual 'chalk and talk' of the teacher.

In 1920 he became an elementary school teacher at the village of Le Bar-sur-Loup. It was there that Freinet began to develop his teaching methods. Between 1929 and 1933 the Freinet followers developed and expanded the movement they had established. Later, Freinet abandoned public education and in 1935 he founded an independent school in the adjacent area of Vence. In this very place Freinet applied and developed his techniques until 1940. Freinet died in Vence in 1966. His movement

continued after his death and Elise Freinet, his wife, kept the memory of her husband alive.

Freinet's basic philosophy underlies what he himself called 'techniques for living'. This formula is a way of expressing a fundamental distrust of anything formal, anything forced and artificial, as well as a way of having a grateful trust in nature.

The Essential Concepts of Freinet Pedagogy

Freinet's Pedagogy focuses both on co-operative learning and child-centered techniques. It is crucial that children experience the joy of initiative, free choice, creation and vision to improve their lives through their learning and work at school. Classrooms are transformed into a space of free expression and communication and learning is based on inquiries coming from the children's questions, interests and motivations. In this way, a connection between school and community is built, so teachers and students can work together for the development of the students' critical consciousness aiming at their social emancipation. Students will be in constant interaction with society. In a classroom community democratic spirit will be developed as well as values, such as mutual respect, responsibility, cooperation and mutual assistance, will be strengthened.

At a larger scale, students are exposed to authentic learning environments and educated to become democratic citizens that learn to co-operate and care for the common good, respect diversity and act, react on a sense of justice, solidarity and equality.

Freinet has developed various techniques which are presented below and are based on his philosophy and vision regarding public education:

1. Free texts
2. Learning Printing Technique (newspaper, small books, wall newspaper)
3. School Correspondence
4. Cinema and radio
5. School/ Classroom Assembly
6. Field Investigations

The aforementioned techniques open a window to the community through free expression. They are based on communication and collaboration skills. By employing printing techniques, cinema and radio, children's ideas and experiences can travel further. Students become active, responsible and emancipated citizens of today and tomorrow. They are able to conduct surveys, motivated by their own interests and questions they have. In that way, the school classroom is transformed into a place where each voice can be heard, can take action, propose, listen to, cooperate, and find solutions. Consequently, a community by children for children is created.

Regarding the first technique mentioned above, i.e. free texts, we can support the idea that anyone can write one. A free text can be literally anything: an experience, a diary entry, a weather forecast, a recipe, a novel or just a sentence.

There are numerous benefits to implementing this technique in our classrooms that affect every aspect of school life and reality. First of all, it is a natural approach of teaching and co-operative learning. As a result, students participate actively and are able to co-construct knowledge. Secondly, it enhances free expression and creativity, since students express themselves through spontaneous writing and choose the text genre they wish to produce. Thirdly, everyone can learn through sharing their authentic experiences and also come closer to each other. Fourthly, communication skills are developed as well as the ability of listening and interacting. Last but not least, a strong connection between school and community is established where there are no boundaries.

How is this technique implemented in the classroom?

First of all we introduce the free text technique in the classroom.

We brainstorm what a free text is. According to the pupils, it could be a dream, a poem, an interesting fact, a piece of news, a story, something that has no boundaries, something to express ourselves and much more.

In order to introduce them to the concept of text enrichment and participative learning, we draw a simple flower with the red marker. Then we ask the students to choose a marker of a different color and add whatever they wish to our drawing. As you can see, a simple drawing can be transformed into a richer one with the cooperation of many people.

After this introductory stimulus we move on to the first step of the process where the students write their free text in their notebooks. It takes from 20 to 40 minutes to complete the writing process, depending on the students' age. They have the option to draw a picture for their text and finally it is necessary to go back to the text and make their own first corrections as soon as the writing process is completed.

In the second step roles are undertaken by the students themselves. There is a person responsible for giving the floor to whoever wants to speak and a person in charge of the board. The former gives the floor to the students who want to read their text aloud in (their) turn. During the reading process the latter draws something representing the text. After each narration, students are given the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. If no comments are made on a text, the teacher tries to draw attention to something specific in it.

In the third step, we recall the texts that have been read through the board drawings. In this step we all have the opportunity to vote for the texts we liked. The teacher always tries to have one extra vote in order to avoid a text not getting a vote. At this point it is very important to remind students that we are not voting for our friends, but for our favorite text. The most voted text is the one that we will correct all together in the fourth step. In this process we look more closely for spelling, grammatical or syntactical errors, we work on text structure and how it could be improved and enriched.

Then this text is posted on the class and school wall newspaper. In addition, students have the option of turning their texts into articles for the school newspaper and creating podcasts on the school radio. In this way, they are in direct contact with the community. They walk around their neighborhood to distribute their newspaper and broadcast on a larger scale on the radio. They share their news through correspondence with other schools. This makes writing and learning meaningful to the students.

Results based on observation

After the consistent application of the free text technique for three years, we noted a gradual progress in the students' cognitive level as well as their participation in class.

The weekly application of the technique as well as its integration in our weekly schedule led to the students' better understanding of our initial goals. They participated actively by undertaking roles such as being responsible for giving the

floor to whoever wants to speak and being in charge of writing on the board as well as having the primary responsibility of comments and questions.

On the day of the free text writing students were excited. They looked forward to writing their text and following the rest of the process. On the other hand, if, for any reason, free text writing didn't take place on that day, they would show their disappointment and ask for another time and day.

As time went by, they felt even more free to express their feelings, their views and their questions. Furthermore, they seemed more and more comfortable receiving comments and feedback on their text by their classmates. Their fear of making mistakes started to diminish and they felt less embarrassed during the correction process. In fact, what they really wanted was that their text would be the one to be corrected in class.

The process of reading aloud boosted their self-confidence. About 14 out of 20 students per average wished to read their texts. Moreover, they borrowed ideas and enriched their texts with refined vocabulary and a better syntactic structure. Each text voted for was unique, so we could concentrate on specific orthographic, grammatical and syntactic phenomena; as a result, students were able to revise and comprehend more.

At the beginning of the application of this technique, there were students at lower levels of cognitive ability that either refused to write or wrote one or two lines. Along the way and without any pressure, their interest was sparked and their writing ability improved too. All the more, they wanted to be part of the class, that's why they tried to perform better. Even the students at higher levels of cognitive ability improved free text writing by increasing the size of their texts. There were times that the given writing time was insufficient.

Even though a little competition used to lurk in the beginning, as time passed they realised that not a single text is the same as the others and each text has its own value. They praised their classmates and often sought co-operation.

Their texts made the others laugh, dream, explore, think or even trouble. Furthermore, what we think that made their love for this technique grow stronger was the freedom to decide whether to keep their texts to themselves, share them with the rest of the class or disseminate them to the rest of the community via the school newspaper or podcasts.

It is strongly believed that free writing must be genuinely free. Anyone can write whenever has something to say, when he feels a need to set down in writing. Spontaneous writing is an activity children will do on a corner of the table late at night; on their knees, while listening to their grandmother relive the extraordinary stories of life in days gone by, on their schoolbags, while waiting to go into class, and also, naturally without prodding, during the free periods scheduled into the school day. In this way, we can be sure that the writing produced represents, in a living way, the things that most deeply stir the children's feelings, the things that mean the most to them, the things that have the most educational value. Writing about their own experiences and reading about the experiences of the other pupils provided the framework for reflection in which the pupils can thermalize their own self/world relationship.

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