Local, national and transnational identities in EubuildIT: A European educational media project

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ITC) have become the driving force behind the current transformation in knowledge and culture. As educators working within the field of cultural heritage, we are driven to think of ways to use these tools to promote a polyphonic world respectful of human diversity: the foundation of a culture of peace.

In facilitating a world of instant and constant contact, where all manner of information can be sourced, ICT has fostered a sense of solidarity with others as much as it has caused division. This portal to the global world, by promoting a homogenising of societies, has limited economic centralization, which in turn has had repercussions on the consumption of material and cultural resources. In some ways, our times seem to have achieved what cultural analysis\(^\text{123}\) has been suggesting for the past decades: a loss of local traditions and a limiting of access to cultural values and assets: the traits, values and assets that have structured Western societies.

The EubuildIT project is based on the notion that buildings are part of, and witness to, a society’s cultural heritage. The project has been developed around six themes, each with different approaches to cultural heritage, with the aim of making resources and media available to the educational community at large. Information and Communication Technologies have been used to enable a better sharing of resources amongst museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, giving the project an educational dimension in the European space.

The importance of Information Technologies

ICT has facilitated the exchange of information, enabling the observation of phenomena which previously could only be seen in extremely limited conditions and by a restricted number of persons. ICT offers not only greater possibilities for the transmission of knowledge, but also for communication with other spheres. All this can be seen in libraries, schools, workplaces, and crowded Internet cafés: in the quietness of an individual room or in a small isolated village. In our unthinking consumption of these resources, we sometimes forget the investment of time and labour they require. It seems that to some virtual reality has become a substitute for contact with the real world.

In addition, these new technologies enable access to information that was previously organized and systematized, now reproduced and made available through a range of media. What we access through a database or the Internet – be it music, movies, text or images – is the result of continuous, detailed and systematic work by an enormous body of institutions, researchers, technicians and others: a fact many tend to forget or ignore. Therein lies the rising problem of copyright, now in a new context, which has become a battle between the ethics of availability and the rights of the author.

As everyday consumers, a simplistic notion of ready access to ITC may make us increasingly dependent on anonymous information sources, whereby we lose the ability to make judgements. As well as promoting a passive consumer attitude, this also creates the illusion that everything is complete and ready to use, thus enabling a lazy mental outlook. The abundance of information can, according to some, result in a failure in both communications and in the construction of knowledge. This means that all the emphasis placed on IT, an emphasis that sometimes leads us to a somewhat difficult restructuring of our lifestyle and work habits, must be accompanied by supportive actions and projects towards the identification, conservation and organization of artefacts that can provide information and data. In practice, in the fields in which we work – cultural heritage and education – there cannot be data without research, and a project for cultural and educational intervention. There cannot be a virtual museum without the conservation of real artefacts: be they relative to buildings and landscapes, religions, industry, arts, literature or schooling. Even forgery needs a forged object.

This means that the ease or difficulty of accessing IT will define, in the foreseeable future, one more chasm between developed and developing countries. However, in many contexts, the attention given to computer media has not had positive repercussions when it comes to the conservation of cultural memories. This situation becomes a paradox, as the storing of information requires less physical space but a greater sophistication in the organization of institutions.

**Cultural heritage: Communication and knowledge**

Talking about cultural heritage is, nowadays, a dual reference to both local cultures and global cultures. Due to advances in technology and travel, the world is presented to us as a compact space, with a degree of proximity exposing us to, and enabling us to become familiar with, an enormous cultural diversity. The acknowledgment of the planet as a global village has led us to recognize natural and social spaces that must be preserved for the heritage of humankind. This was the case when UNESCO recognized the urban area of Porto in the Douro viticultural region (where port wine is produced), and the Völklingen ironworks, as World Heritage sites. As a classification that denotes these sites as ‘universal’, this simultaneously recognizes in them the specific characteristic of a ‘site’. This is a paradox of our time, the time of post-modernity and globalization, where there are, simultaneously, processes of localization and assertion of local cultures. The globalization that precedes the homogenization of consumption, behaviour, layout of spaces, and the development of third cultures\(^{134}\), brings with it the breakdown of meaning and the sense of hierarchy.

\(^{134}\) This term defines the group of cultural industry professionals, from television to fashion, who take on the role of mediators between people of different national cultures. They become familiarized with
of a culture and, in the end, the search for a 'sense of belonging'.\footnote{For this reason, it is crucial to clarify the concept of local culture, given that we work with the transmission of cultural heritage (local-national; European and global).} According to Featherstone (1997), local culture generally refers to particular phenomena, tied to a limited space and inhabited by dense interpersonal relationships. In local culture there is an emphasis on knowledge of the physical space, the daily habits and routines, symbols and ceremonies that reinforce bonds between people and create a shared feeling towards the past. These are the experiences that are lived in common and become engrained in the spaces, buildings and relations between people that create a sense of inclusion and the 'sense of belonging'. In this way, local culture is a relational concept that creates boundaries to the identity of a community, to the exclusion of those outside. In the context of economic and information globalization there is an even more pressing need for understanding, more so as the fluxes of global cultural industries tend to destroy collective memory and the 'sense of belonging', creating a sense of cultural uprooting.

The notion of history and the past is mainly constructed through commemorative and ritualistic practices, from family parties to more extensive community celebrations. These are the practices that forge emotional bonds between people, symbolically ingraining gestures, sounds, images and smells into collective spaces and buildings, marking them with feelings. Without this symbolic ingraining there is no 'recognisable cultural capital': hence the importance of recreation and celebration of traditions, and the identification of traditional lifestyles in the construction of a sense of belonging in a place, and of plural identity. Some examples of this, according to Featherstone (1997, 95) are "Theme parks, some contemporaneous museums and all the industry that is related with heritage, as they contribute to producing a sense of well-being that transports us to a past lived in the form of fiction."

These current forms of preservation "where the real blends with the simulation", allows older people to reinforce a lost "sense of belonging" and younger people to realistically recreate cultural aspects of the past.

In the period 2005-2008, the EUBuildIT (European Buildings and Information Technologies) project operated as a collaborative between universities, schools, institutions for teacher training and e-Learning, and museums from six European countries. Each national partner provided one theme, to which the other partners contributed by providing examples from their own country. This often emphasized sharp contrasts between national situations and attitudes – for example, war or progress may have destroyed buildings in one country, yet preserved those in others.

The selected themes for the project were: 'Religious buildings' (Finland), 'Technological monuments' (Germany), 'Manufacturing buildings' (Poland), 'Educational buildings' (Portugal), 'Fountains' (Spain) and 'Fortifications' (United Kingdom). The list of potential buildings included assembles, railway stations, water towers, town halls, town houses, theatres, lighthouses, hotels, city gates etc. The

\footnote{\textit{Meaning the feeling of belonging to a place achieved through the sharing of traditions and collective memory.}}

and absorb the national culture in which they work, and contribute to its development in a global framework of references, but always taking into account the specificities of the local culture. This multiculturalism does not necessarily mean more tolerance towards the "other" (Featherstone, 1997).}
participants' final choice of buildings was based on institutional, local and/or personal factors.

Objectives and target groups

Cultural heritage, as the memory of the past, helps people understand the present and the future. The objective of the project was to demonstrate that buildings are a witness to European cultural heritage. For primary students the materials draw attention to particular features of buildings and ask students to interpret them; for secondary and tertiary students, attention has also been drawn to controversial issues within or between communities – to which buildings present an enduring testimony. Widely dispersed sources of information have been brought together for this project by exploiting the possibilities of ITC. Internet users worldwide were thus able to access the project homepage regardless of place, time, gender or other social factors.

The target groups were teachers, student teachers, students, other educational staff and staff working in local heritage education institutions, universities, museums, libraries, archives, research and training centers and internet users in general.

To improve accessibility, the project has worked to develop multilingual modules – German, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Galician, Finnish, Swedish, Sámi and Polish – within subject-specific teaching programs. Subjects for which these modules are most appropriate include native language, foreign languages, history, geography, sociology, religion and philosophy. There will be two main types of activities and related outputs: virtual (multi-lingual interactive web pages and communication media, on-line worksheets) and real (workshops, projects in schools, multi-lingual didactic cultural heritage itineraries and informative materials). Each country developed a theme reflecting the national heritage of buildings in their region.

Overall and specific objectives

- To develop, at a European level, a common platform for cultural heritage which could increasingly support information exchange and contribute to the development of European citizenship.
- To exploit the possibilities of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) resources, e-learning and blended learning (e-learning supported by hard-copy resources).
- To disseminate the results of specific European projects through Internet and print media, and the organization of workshops.
- To work towards the development of a European dimension in the treatment of history (Common issues can be foregrounded without omitting those unique to each country).
- To combine local, regional and European history in the context of the national curriculum.
- To enable teachers to develop approaches that move from the local/regional experience to the European, so that local and regional history can be understood as part of European history, and local events understood in a European context.
• To research the possibilities and limitations of the Internet and other forms of ICT in supporting and facilitating heritage education.

• To disseminate the results of the project through ongoing accessibility of the website, and by the organization of teacher training courses within the framework of the Lifelong Learning Program (LLP) of the European Commission.

As part of their twice-yearly conference, the participating countries organized seminars and workshops for teachers and other professionals. Seminars were based on the body of work developed in the project (e.g. thematic areas related to each part; progress and results in enhancing project culture; updating agendas for intercultural exchange; the relationship between cultural heritage, arts, and the use of new technologies; and other subjects selected by the participants). Seminars also supported lifelong learning in areas such as the ethos or cultural heritage of the organizing country. All events were delivered in English and the national language of the host country.

The main 'additional' output of the project has been the development of multi-lingual (EN, DE, ES, FI, PL, PT, SE, Samic, Galician) pedagogical materials for teacher-training courses in the frame of Comenius Professional Development, to create a manual for an in-service teacher training course to give teachers the possibility of vocational training in cultural heritage.

Another 'additional' output has been the variety of languages. Each web page has text in each participating country's language: it is possible to read the same material in any language, and to go from any language text on one page to the same language on another. On each page text in English will be at the top of the page, this being common language of the project, with the language of the participating country after.

To go to any language, the user clicks on one of the flags on the right-hand side of the page. Clicking on the British flag at the bottom of each section allows users to go back to the top of the page. The links to the left of the screen, and the titles, are in English on all pages.

The EUBuildIT logo reflects the shared ethos and experience of the countries involved in this project. They worked in different countries and institutions, but under the roof of European cooperation in the ‘House of Europe’ – a virtual building. The project boasted participants from throughout Europe: including member states which belonged to the EU from the beginning, and those which joined the EU after overcoming dictatorship and/or the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The project logo (above) not only represents the diverse types of buildings in the project united under a common roof, but also symbolises the motto of the European Union – “United in Diversity”. After three years of intensive and fruitful work on this project, and a well-running partnership we can say: “It is worth conserving the past”.

To paraphrase the project title: WeBuiltIT.
The Portuguese contribution

Working within their chosen theme, the Portuguese team developed a ‘pedagogical suitcase’ of materials and resources for classroom use. The ‘pedagogical suitcase’ is a tool used in museum educational programs. This project’s pedagogical suitcase, entitled “Building in a Box” draws on the museum model, as well as web and other technologies. The “Building in a Box” contains scale models of Portuguese school buildings; a collection of old primary school books; a quill and ink well; a writing slate and slate pencil; colouring pencils; a fountain pen and notebooks used for the teaching of writing. Together these elements provided information on the teaching materials of earlier times.

In addition to the above there was a camera, Mp3 player and DVD player. These tools allowed for autonomous as well as group work, both to carry out the suggested tasks as well as gather data and promote exchange and discussion with other schools. There was also a CD-rom with 3D models of Portuguese schools, using a free downloadable program, Google SketchUp Viewer. Using this program, students can wander through a virtual environment, removing walls to see how school spaces were constituted in past times, and relating this to the materials. An example of is available for viewing on the EUbuildIT site.

In developing this didactic support device for teachers, we believe “Building in a Box”, rejuvenates the tradition of museum educational services and other government institutions – from the 1960s on – distributing boxed pedagogical support materials to schools.

In conclusion, we believe this project has allowed us – in line with national and European objectives for basic education – to “research the limits and possibilities of the Internet and other Information Technologies as a support to educational heritage”. The teacher and student surveys available on the site have allowed us to analyse the impact of the project by verifying, not only the number of site users, but also user profiles and objectives. These surveys have also allowed for feedback about the importance and social relevance of the project as a whole. We have not excluded its usage in other situations, such as teacher training, and by other working in the area of cultural heritage.
Bibliography


