



33. Creative Writing Colaboratory

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Abstract

The “Creative writing” microworld pretend to awaken the children and students for the reading and writing activities as a source of pleasure and amusement.

In this way, we do not intend to substitute the page of the book nor the sheet of paper for the computer screen, nor even the pencil or rubber for the keyboard or mouse of the computer. What we have in mind is to obtain a complementarity of all these elements to acquire competent readers and writers, according to the level of knowledge to be achieved by the children at the end of the Kid Stage 1 (KS 1).

Starting with this microworld and with the experience obtained in the technological environment, we can appeal do the return of the book as an object of permanent presence and of constant recreation.

In this paper we describe the Creative Writing microworld, build on Imagine, as a colaboratory to write and share stories over the Internet.

Keywords

Creative writing, microworld, colaboratory, CoLabs, learning communities, web publishing for children, Imagine

1. Fundamental Ideas

Nowadays, in the scholar context, in the media, at home, in different places and contexts, it is usual to hear that students, either younger or older, do not like reading or writing. Teachers refer the enormous difficulties founded in motivating their students for reading and writing.

Generally, one of the causes for this lack of motivation is the supply of other media much more attractive (video games, computers, television...) when compared to the book. This one appears as an object without movement and very demanding concerning focus and concentration.

Although and in spite of this lack of motivation for reading and writing, a significant number of students feels attraction for the reading of large books, such as the several “Harry Potter” volumes by J. K. Rowling. This fact, apparently inconsistent, makes us reflect about the children’s attitude and the role the school can have relating the motivation for reading.

This means that reading cannot be only a tedious exercise; it must be seen as a “game for psycholinguistics guessing” (Martins, 2000: 33). We also need to understand that reading is



not simply the decomposition of the grapheme/phoneme, but mostly a “dialog” with the text, searching for meanings that can be plural.

“To be a reader is being able to appreciate and multiply the world understands, it is being in permanent relation with myself and with the other. It is the discovery of ourselves through what we project in the text, it is being able to read in the other that is in the text, which, sometimes, is different and other times, is equal” (Cavalcanti, 1999: 18).

The text read and understood is also the starting point for new knowledge, new adventures and journeys, and can have as a result the writing production of the child itself.

The skills for reading and writing integrate the global development of learning and so, they interpenetrate and complement themselves. It happens often the willing for writing after reading a good text. Although, when the student is proposed with the task of writing, he has the difficulty of producing creative and well structured pieces of text. There is almost an allergic reaction to the writing activity, as the challenge of filling a blank sheet of paper seems enormous. But if we pay attention, we can verify that, currently, there is a lot of writing, only it has formats that are a bit different from the usual. There are several interchanges of messages by e-mail or by mobile phone. This shows the need of using writing as a mean of communication of ideas, feelings and data.

Facing this reality, the school has to remake its preconceived ideas and alter some of its practices, assuming that writing cannot be an exercise, but a creative act. In this way, we have to create conditions for this birth.

Therefore, we propose an alteration in the curricular context, giving the text the meaning of an enchanted object and making it as a starting point for other texts and stories. One of the possible strategies is the use of stories for children written by national (Portuguese) authors. These stories have a source of meanings and imagination that are able to mobilize the child’s attention.

The “Creative writing” microworld is based on these presupposes, assuming that it does not pretend to answer specifically to the needs of the language knowledge, nor even to convert reading and writing activities in a similar exercise of what is done in traditional school classes. We propose to awaken the children and students for the reading and writing activities as a source of pleasure and amusement.

In this way, we do not intend to substitute the page of the book nor the sheet of paper for the computer screen, nor even the pencil or rubber for the keyboard or mouse of the computer. What we have in mind is to obtain a complementarity of all these elements to acquire competent readers and writers, according to the level of knowledge to be achieved by the children at the end of the Kid Stage 1 (KS 1).

Starting with this microworld and with the experience obtained in the technological environment, we can appeal do the return of the book as an object of permanent presence and of constant recreation.



2. Aims

Developing the taste for reading and writing, we think that we can contribute to the acquisition of two major and nuclear skills of the Native Language: Reading and Writing. This achievement has several development aims through KS 1:

- Basic mechanisms learning for understanding the means of the written material;
- Ability to decompose, automatically, grapheme schemes, to localize information in the written material and to learn the global meaning of a short text;
- Knowledge of basic strategies to decompose grapheme schemes and to extract information from written material;
- Be aware of the existing instrumental techniques of writing;
- Aptitude to produce written texts with different communication aims and target audiences;
- Knowledge of the basic techniques for text organization.

3. Target Users

The target users of the “Creative writing” microworld are students on final years of the KS 1 and also with 9 and 10 years old. These users must have the decomposition process (character – sound) automatic and enough fine motion control to work with the keyboard and/or with the mouse of the computer. The instructions about the work to be done are simple, so the users do not need to have a special know-how to use the computer.

This microworld has also as a target the KS1 teachers, as they are extremely important for the motivation and effort of their students. In this way, they do need to be involved in the project.

At Training School Teachers Paula de Frassinetti (in Porto, Portugal), we have selected a group of teachers working with KS1. These teachers have shown the willing for innovating, they had the basic skills of working with the Windows environment and they were used to work inside teams. They were personally invited to have a direct participation in the project. So, the schools and teachers implied in the project were:

Name of the School	Nr. of teachers
School EB 1 Ponte n.º 2 – Aves	2
School EB 1 / Kindergarten nr. 6 – Porto	1
Colégio Coração de Jesus (Colégio do Sardão)	2
Externato das Escravas do Sagrado Coração de Jesus	2



4. Project Implementation

4.1. Stages

The different implementation stages of this microworld were based on the definition of a global strategy made by the whole Research Team. It was also based on several specific aspects due to the fact of the microworld implied prototype construction.

We can consider the following stages in this project:

Constitution of the **research team** and task assignment.

Definition of the **aims** to achieve, the target users, the implementation strategies and the characteristics of the microworld “Creative writing”. This stage was particularly important, as it implied a theoretic and practical reflection about some eventual needs that may arise in schools. These requirements may concern the reading / writing process and the way the computer use can help surpass them. On the other hand, we tried to find an attractive structure for the microworld, different from the usual and opened enough to allow its permanent extension, inside each school or in the interchange between schools.

Choice of a **story** in the childhood literature and **1st prototype** design. We have considered important the use of a story with a rich content and that could provide the development of several activities, inside the microworld and starting with it. We have chosen the story “*Os ovos misteriosos*” (“The mysterious eggs”) by Luísa Ducla Soares with pictures by Manuela Bacelar. We have contacted the authors to obtain the authorization for this use. Based on the images and text of the story, we have designed the 1st prototype for the microworld.

Meeting with the cooperative teachers on the 10th December 2002. After a general **presentation** of the **aims** of the project, we have launched the **discussion** about the **reading / writing problematic** in the classroom, on KS1. We have verified that, in a general way, the teachers’ opinions concerning this problematic were common, that is, students have little willing for this kind of activities and they even have concrete difficulties in doing it. Although, there was some contradiction with certain situations in which the reading of several books, like “Harry Potter” for instance, had attracted and brought enormous interest for the young people. This moment allowed the sharing of experiences concerning the reading approach in the different schools. A second aspect proposed for reflection was the **role of the new technologies**, in this context. We intended to demystify the general idea that the use of the computer destroys the interest by the book. Based on these presupposes, we asked for **contributes** related to the **microworld’s definition**.

Sent of the first **produced materials**. We have sent to the schools one CD-Rom, containing the **first prototype** and **instructions** for its use. We also sent some **questionnaires**, through which we pretended to know better the target users and their reaction to the 1st prototype.

Collection of the questionnaires and **data analysis**. This stage become more complex than what we have thought, once some of the schools took too long to implement the work requested and to answer to our demands.



Second prototype construction. Having collected and analysed the answers to the questionnaires and suggestions, we improved the 1st prototype. We have deleted some aspects and added new functions. We were able to achieve a 2nd prototype to be used by the cooperating schools.

4.2. Human and Material Resources

For the development of the “Creative writing” microworld, we needed to mobilize several human resources that involved:

Researchers from Cnotinfor and from Teacher’s Training School Paula Frassinetti;

Teachers from Elementary Schools;

Training teachers;

Designer and programmer from Cnotinfor;

Students of the schools.

According to the proposal of the global strategy of the project, we tried to have an eloquent and fluid intervention between all the elements of the team, in such a way to take the most of the synergy resulting of the several theoretic and practical knowledge.

Concerning the material resources, they were required especially in the following moments:

In the prototype constructions stage – books of childhood literature, computers, scanner, digital camera;

In the work and evaluation of the prototypes stage – computers with sound blaster.

4.3. CDROM and End User Manual

As we already mentioned, we were able to have a 2nd prototype available in CD-Rom and on the Internet. It comes with a user manual that explains all the tools available.

Mostly, there are the following functioning hypotheses:

Open an already made story and develop several activities based upon it;

Open an existing story and alter it, building a new one;

Build new stories and send them to other users.

The stories can be opened from the CD-Rom (original story of “*Os ovos misteriosos*” – “The mysterious eggs”), from the hard disk or from the Internet (being implemented).

When we open a story, we can see the main menu, in the normal mode, the title of the story and the first scene with its text.



Figure 1. Initial screen

It is possible to read and “navigate” in a story, according to eight different combinations, from which we indicate three of them:



See only the images;

See the images and its text;

See the images, read its text and listen to the story.

We can print the story in several ways:

Image and text – A4 landscape (horizontal orientation)

Image and text – A4 portrait (vertical orientation)

Comic book (each page has 6 scenes with the text above the image) – A4 landscape

Comic book (6 scenes with the text above the image per page) – A4 portrait

Thumbnails (9 per page) – A4 landscape

Complete text, without image – A4 portrait



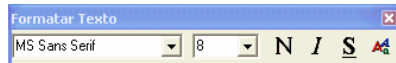


Besides the use of an already saved story, it is possible to make the (re)creation of that story. In this case, we intend to apply the initial story as a motivation for the conception of a new story. There are two modes of working: normal mode and thumbnails mode.



In the **normal mode**, we have the following tools:

painting editor – it has tools such as the pencil, the spray, the line, the rectangle, the circle, the rubber, the paint container, the selection. It is also possible to insert images (backgrounds and objects). These can be imported from the CD-Rom or by using another images organizer. The images can replace, total or partially, the original drawings of the story, making a new text.



text editor – it has the basic functions for editing text (different font types, several sizes, colours...). The only restriction is the size of the panel. With this function, it is possible to create a new text for the drawings of the original story or for the new drawings and images.

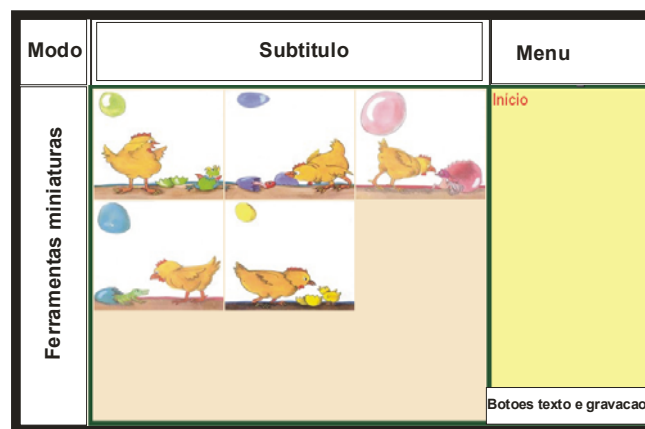


sound record – it allows to insert sounds (sound effects, music, MP3) and to record the text of the new story. In this last case, we will need a microphone.



In the **thumbnails mode**, it is possible to reorder, eliminate and duplicate the scenes of the story.

This mode allows seeing a global vision of the story and it can be used to structure the story and to create subtitles for the several scenes. It can also be applied to reorder or to disarrange one story.



Editor de miniaturas

Figure 2. Thumbnails Mode Screen (prevision)



The original story is shown in sets of 9 scenes at once, with one vertical slider. We can use the mouse or the arrow keys to select each scene. The selected scene is identified with a border.

It is possible to use the following functions:

Reorder the images – using the mouse or the arrow keys, it is possible to alter the sequence of images, allowing creating a new narrative.

Delete images – using the mouse cursor to select the scene and the Delete key, it is possible to eliminate one scene from the original ensemble.

Copy scenes – using the Copy tool, we can duplicate scenes.

Edit text – on the right side of the screen, we can see the text of the selected scene. It can be modified, using the editing tools mentioned above.

Record sounds and text – the tools are the same as described for the normal mode.



Being the interactivity with other schools one of the aims of this microworld, it is possible to import stories (make their **download**) from the Internet and alter them.



When the work is done, it can be saved and exported (make its **upload**) to the Internet, organized in pre-defined categories. It is automatically registered the name of the author(s) and the title of the story. In the Internet, the story will be available for all the interested ones.

4.4. Guidelines for Teachers

With this microworld, it is possible to make several activities, depending on the work and interest shown by students and teachers. As examples, we present some suggestions that involve several kinds of skills in the Language domain that have themselves other kinds of skills implicated.

of recognizing – comprehension of the oral (attribute the meaning to phonic ensembles) and reading (extract the meaning of grapheme ensembles);

of production – oral expression (production of phonic ensembles with sense) and writing expression (production of grapheme ensembles with sense);

of elaboration – explicit knowledge.

After having the decomposition process (character – sound) as an automatic routine, the use of the “Creative writing” microworld, in an assistive and oriented way, can provide the possibility of assembling numerous activities.

Silent reading	Doing the silent reading of a text previous written thinking about its purpose: information, entertainment or preparation for loud reading.
Clear and loud reading	We can use an audio record for reading the text (previously prepared in silence), for making a subsequently evaluation of the reading, taking into account parameters as: punctuation, expressivity, rhythm, intonation, accentuation... This evaluation can be made in groups, in pairs or individually.



Identification of the main ideas of a text	Underline and highlight the parts of the text that have the most important elements, such as actions, characters, places or the most significant moments of a story.
Contents anticipation	Anticipate the contents, the actions' developments or the ending of a story (starting with the title or with the first lines of a text with or without the pictures, photos, images, drawings, cartoons...). After this, we can confirm if what has been anticipated is effectively related to the picture, photo, first lines of the text...
Use of a computer keyboard	Write small texts illustrated with images, objects, sound effects, audio record, managing the existing space in the page, organizing the presentation to the class mates or other kind of audience.
Writing exercises with memorized texts	Write words (orthographically well-written) of the elementary vocabulary (using the main punctuation signs, uppercase letters and demonstrating a new paragraph), based upon proverbs, guessing, small poems...
Write short stories	Compose and illustrate small stories of the daily school life to narrate to relatives and friends, using the writing as substitute of the oral.
Narratives of personal experiences	Make the photographic record of the most representative moments of the activities related to a study journey and make the necessary comments.
Rewrite of listened or read stories	Retell listened or read stories, making the necessary alterations, combinations or introducing strange elements, with the aim of training the speech routines characteristics of the narrative texts. (Cf.: Rodari: 1993) For example, the Red Riding Hood goes to her grandmother's house by motorcycle; The Three Little Pigs meet Goldilocks and the Three Bears.
Association of text to images and of images to small texts	Compose news or small pieces of journalism based upon real or non-real facts, associating them to the existing images.
Collective writing	Write texts within small or large groups, learning how to progress from an initial draft until the final, consensual, correct and continuously improve text.
Elaboration of games with questions and answers	Elaborate games with questions and answers about different themes (scholar or not), with or without multiple choice, respecting the elementary rules of concordance (subject – verb; noun – adjective – determinant) and using complex sentences to express sequences and relations.

So, the “Creative writing” microworld has as its major aim to involve and to exercise mental processes that allow: to receive, to organize, to elaborate, to retain, to recover and to play with the information, through symbols handling.



The suggestions proposed above have followed the indications mentioned in Sim-Sim et alii (1997).

5. Evaluation

The “Creative writing” microworld’s proposal has the fundamentals of its idea based upon three stages:

1. a brief **diagnosis** of the actual situation concerning the reading and writing world in scholar ages;
2. a large and involving **definition** of the reader, related to the reading and writing skills expected at the end of the KS1, and integrated in the global development of learning;
3. and finally, the **proposal** itself that consists in recapture “the text as an enchanted object”, involving the levels of performance and the life in a technological environment.

Based on the expectations and on the reactions observed in the target users, we can confirm the diagnosis and notice that the proposed concept of reader / reconstructor / author corresponds to what effectively is desirable, being innovative and motivated for the children.

The aims mentioned were derived from the Curricular Programme of the Portuguese Language for the KS1. These objectives, in spite of being centred in this domain, they go much farther and are related to other skills in different areas (curricular and not). After evaluating the first prototype, we were able to see that the initial objectives were consistent and flexible enough, to allow a constant, sustained and coherent renewal of the proposals. Therefore, we tried never to loose from sight the last and most important aim that is the global development of the child.

The target users chosen were not altered, as we consider them adequate to the project’s purpose concerning the involved agents. Although, we consider that, in a future project, it would be desirable to enlarge the accessibility of this microworld to the users who have not enough fine motion control to work and manage with the keyboard and/or with the mouse of a computer.

The implementation of the project suffered some necessary and justified changes due to the dynamic nature of the work methodology assumed. At this point, we must register the lack of evaluation concerning the second prototype, due to short period of time available for this stage of the project.

Among other important aspects, we must enhance the group dynamics developed. So, we also refer the intensive work meetings:

From the 24th to 26th of November 2002, in Penacova, where we discuss, among other subjects, the title of the project (“Creative writing”), the target users (teachers and students of the KS1), the digital platform (CD-Rom and Internet connection) and the manual for the teacher.

From the 15th to 17th of December 2002, in Tocha, with the participation of the engineer programmers and the designers, we discussed the ideas developed until then. We also structured the document for the conception of the second prototype.



From the 1st to 3rd of May 2003, in Coimbra, with the involvement of all the elements of the team. It was possible to ultimate the user manual for the teacher, start this report and program the second prototype.

The global definition of the aims, of the target users, of the implementation strategies and of the characteristics of the “Creative writing” microworld allowed an important reflection for the correct performance in the schools.

The choice of the first story, “*Os ovos misteriosos*” (“The mysterious eggs”) by Luísa Ducla Soares with pictures by Manuela Bacelar, revealed to be satisfactory, due to the simplicity of the language concerning the ages of the target users; although, there were some negative opinions about the white background of the pictures.

The meeting with the participant teachers held on the 10th December 2002 allowed letting them know the aims of the microworld and the advantages of the use of the new technologies in the scholar context of reading and writing.

We asked the teachers and the training teachers to register their opinions and suggestions and the ones of the children, to help making the evaluation of the first prototype of the “Creative writing” microworld.

Relating to the available elements for the evaluation, in this stage of development and application of the project, we were able to collect four types of data:

Negative aspects (difficulties / problems) – the teachers and the students had some difficulties in understanding the instructions given and in using the material delivered.

Positive aspects (simplicity / management) – the teachers and the students had no problems or difficulties in the preparation of the intervention. The teachers thought that the contents and the language used were appropriate do the target users and could be included in the curriculum of the KS1, for its simplicity and context. Also the layout was structured and pleasant.

Aspects to reformulate (improvement proposals) – in the teachers’ perspective, the speech, the images and the interactivity between the several sequences should be improved. Also there should be created more buttons and allow the link to a drawing program with the possibility of printing.

Aspects to develop (suggestions) – concerning the potential of this microworld, the teachers suggested the development of activities to help children to: create stories, based on proposed sequences; punctuate sentences, starting from texts without punctuation; order facts, related to their sequence; answer “yes” or “no” to small sentences associated to one text; create small poems, starting with one sentence or word of the text.

In conclusion, concerning the first version of the microworld prototype and the presented data, we can affirm that there has been a significant interest and a strong motivation in the use of the offered material, in this stage. It was considered attractive, but able to be improved in the referred aspects.

The major parts of negative aspects are now overcome by second prototype, but we need to search a better technical solution for upload and download stories.

The construction of the 2nd prototype was the result of the reflection about the several data obtained with the teachers and others acquired during the students use and manage. We also intend to use this prototype in formal and non-formal contexts.



The human and material resources were several and distinct; although, in several moments and in some specific domains, we missed human resources especially for programming tasks. So, in the 2nd phase of this project, we intend to enlarge these resources.

The produced materials are the “Creative writing” microworld itself and the User Manual and Guidelines for the Teacher. Both of them are available in CD-Rom and in the Internet.

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