

Essay

Children’s University: sound language styles in a radio programme for/with children

Josemir Almeida Barros and Débora d’Ávila Reis

ABSTRACT: *This essay intends to present and reflect on the production and reception of sound language styles, in a radio programme about science, that is called Universidade das Crianças UFMG (UFMG Children’s University). This programme, aimed at children, is broadcast on the UFMG (Federal University of Minas Gerais) Educational Radio Station, located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil.*

KEYWORDS: *Childhood, Language style, Cultures, Radio broadcasting*

UFMG children’s university

It is currently believed that communication processes have been broadened, which demands a reconsideration of the production of scientific knowledge broadcast on the radio, especially those directed towards children. It is not enough to work on style and language, as it is also important for the content to include everyday situations that mean something to the child. But what do children want to know about? How can a relaxed atmosphere be created, so that they feel comfortable about expressing their doubts? How can they be involved in creating the programme, the content, so that the final product reflects children’s culture? With these concerns in mind, a university project entitled *Universidade das Crianças UFMG* (UFMG Children’s University) was born in 2006, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, located in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil. In 2005, the university launched its educational radio station and within that context, our goal was to create radio programmes directed at child audiences. Buckingham [1] tells us that children are considered to be demanding, wise and sophisticated media consumers. In fact, members of the target audience of the UFMG Children’s University are not at all passive; they are able to explain their interests, often show resistance and do not surrender their cultures and knowledge, as Barros and Ribes [2] note.

Each new project on the UFMG Children’s University normally begins with a trip made by its team (researching professors, graduate and post-graduate students) to the school, which includes an initial conversation about science and scientists. The children who participate are mostly aged between 9 and 13 years old. They put their questions about the topic “human body” on pieces of paper, and place them in a sealed box so that not even

their own teacher has access to them. Some put their name and age on their questions, but others choose to remain anonymous. Back at the university, the team discuss the questions. Most of the children's doubts require greater research and discussions, which often culminate in actual interaction with students and researchers in a wide range of fields. Once this stage is complete, texts are drawn up that are later presented to the children as proposed answers. An accessible and pleasant style is used, often using metaphors and analogies, but always concerned with avoiding trivialisation or over-simplification of the topic at hand.

In the second stage, the team return to the school and take with them games, books, plasticine, microscopes, giant dolls: a range of materials that can be useful for creating a relaxed atmosphere so that the questions submitted can be discussed. Those activities, which last approximately 5 days, aim to stimulate discussions on the topic, without being fixed to the point of excluding other important issues that arise during the workshops. A small radio studio is set up on-site so that the children can express and record their own questions at any time.

During the workshops, what we have called "negotiation" occurs among all those present, adults and children, to create the final texts that will be broadcast by the UFMG Educational Radio Station and on the project's website (www.universidadedascrianças.org). Everyone listens to the text and has the chance to make criticisms, suggest changes to style/language, propose analogies and add or remove content. Even the text that is not read at the workshop includes expressions, content and marks from children's worlds that are included by the team of adults that participate in the immersive work at the workshops. The texts are finally recorded and the oral discourse of the radio programme in question can be seen as a phenomenon of cultural communication in which the discourse of the messages is interlinked with educational processes. The different discourses broadcast on the radio programmes are wide-reaching, and they deal not only with topics related to children's reality, but also particular aspects of the adult world, such as alcoholism, chronic inflammatory diseases and ageing.

In summary, what we have called "negotiation" can be understood as a process that is established through several dialogues between adults and children. Children mark their place and implement possible forms of resistance that prioritise their cultures and establish meanings. Furthermore, the time for being a child is preserved throughout the programmes' activities. No possible participation and/or dialogue is demanded of the children as adult figures, and so cultural media creation that includes the demands of childhood is emphasised on the airwaves at the UFMG Children's University.

Childhood and negotiated language styles

Within the UFMG Children's University project, children are viewed as thinking individuals who are able to build concepts and knowledge. Childhood is considered as part of a process that is not rigid, but instead has the fluidity found in historical, social and cultural changes. In that context, we reiterate the idea that children have a particular na-

ture, as a result of their place in the world [1, 3, 4]; they have social interactions, they interpret and produce discourse through their actions in the world. Being a child is not a natural or universal category, determined simply by biology, nor it is something with a fixed meaning, in whose name one can calmly make demands. Instead, it is constantly under construction, a process that is different from a natural category [1]. Based on these notions, the UFMG Children's University programme seek to make the "negotiation" between adults and children a constant feature, in presenting the questions, during workshops and even producing the programme. Children are, therefore, cultural producers, participative agents and the authors of creative dialogues; they are not merely listeners who passively absorb dialogues without first interpreting and reinterpreting them.

As discussed by Braga and Calazanas, active receivers are characterised by their ability to learn by interacting with media products. In that interaction between different cultures, meanings are produced and socialised both, in the children's world, and between children's and adults' worlds [5]. In the work carried out in the UFMG Children's University project, cultural interaction between different agents is seen throughout the entire process of creating and producing the programme. On the other hand, we find children who only listen to the sounds and/or speech made by children on the radio but who may, at certain times, identify and mentally interact with the communication processes in question, since the method used to produce the programme ensures that they include significant elements from children's culture. It is possible for children to establish their own codes that allow them to appropriate the meanings from the different sound signs broadcast during the radio programmes, i.e., it is possible for them to be listeners immersed in potential new interpretations of cultural products. According to Bourdieu [6], all messages are subject to differential reception, in accordance with the social and cultural characteristics of the receiver and, therefore, the processes for receiving spoken messages have many subjective aspects.

Among both adults and children, each group assigns meaning to words in accordance with their life experiences, based on their day-to-day lives and different social and political contexts. The UFMG Children's University project seek to avoid forcing children's culture to submit to adult culture; on the contrary, it attempts to preserve the particular characteristics of each culture. The primary concern is not with distinguishing between children's and adults' culture, but rather the interlinking of those cultures, without forgetting the aspects that are most relevant for a child audience in light of its interpretation. They are different worlds but there are convergences of symbols that provide meanings for singular events. To illustrate this, we present, below, a situation that occurred during the workshop with the children. The discussion was about the question "what is disc herniation?", submitted by one of the children, but probably sent by or in reference to an adult. The text written by the team members stated "that the spinal column is a pile [*pilha*]¹ of little bones". When they heard this sentence, many children demonstrated surprise and one of them asked: "Battery? Does our body run on batteries?" When we heard

¹T.N. — The word "*pilha*" in Portuguese can mean either "battery" or "pile".

this, we realised that the word *pilha* in children's minds was more closely linked to the idea of "machine, toy" than "organisation". The word "*pilha*" (pile/battery) in the text was replaced by the word "*monte*" (mound).

Barros and Ribes [2] stress the concerns of Brecht [7] and Benjamin [8] about the social and political dimension that communication has acquired in contemporary times and, in that context, it is worth highlighting another example of the UFMG Children's University project, in the process of creating and producing the programme "what is a coma?". The reply text proposed by the project team included a section that said "in this situation, there is nothing to be done but switch off the machines, if the family agrees". When the children heard this, one of them immediately exclaimed: "the family doesn't have the right to decide on that person's life! No-one does!" A discussion began on the ethical and social issues relating to euthanasia, which included elements that ended up substantially changing the final text of the programme to be broadcast on the radio.

The UFMG Children's University programme is going on the air

An opening jingle calls listeners' attention to the start of the programme. After, the question comes, always in a child's voice. Following, there is an answer to the question, which is most often recorded by an adult. The programme ends with a jingle and a line from the radio station coordinator.

Below, we introduce the text of one of the radio programmes, in which the questions and answers are recorded by children:

Child 1:

I'm Leonardo, I'm 10 years old and I would like to know: why do we snore?

Child 2:

When we are asleep, all of our muscles relax, even those around the tubes that we use to breathe. By becoming relaxed, the muscles can promote the decreasing of the space, through which the air travels. And when the air passes through that tiny space, it makes a sound, that is called snoring.

Child 1:

And why do our grandparents snore so much?

Child 2:

Because when we get old, our muscles become more relaxed, even our throat muscles.

Child 1:

And does the same thing happen when adults drink beer? They snore so much. . .

Child 2:

That's because alcohol also makes the muscles relax. But other things can also make people snore: a blocked-up nose, enlarged adenoids, tonsillitis.

Child 1:

And why do fat people snore so much?

Child 2:

Because the accumulation of fat around the throat means that the space the air passes through gets even smaller.

Débora Reis, of the Biological Sciences Institute at the UFMG, helped us answer this question.

If you want to get in touch with us, our email address is universidadedascricancas@ufmg.br

Dialogues and more dialogues were necessary in order to create the text above. Children use signs in their process of discourse production, and thus they reveal their cultural identities. So, the scientific radio programs can also be considered as cultural assets that involve participation of children, whose voices become known on the airwaves. The process of producing programmes, leading to different speech carried over the airwaves, allows us to better understand the idea that dialogism is always between discourses [9]. Therefore, on the Childrens University programme, which is broadcast on the UFMG Educational Radio Station, the speech reflects different positions, dialogues and more dialogues.

Final remarks

The process on the Children's University radio programme, in some way, breaks away from an established order, in which the supremacy of adults' discourse often prevents children say what they think or feel about certain subjects. The programmes can be considered as the result of an interactive process, since childrens speech is included in them, and words and thought from the childrens world are appreciated throughout all the process. They are produced with sound language styles, not only for children, but most of all with children. In this way, the UFMG Children's University project establishes the interception of a "circuit" that many understand to be linear communication. In the workshops, the process of rethinking and redefining language codes lead to the deconstruction the linear circuit, and thus the message transmitted by the radio programmes carries a rather complex network of meanings.

At a time when the consumption of cultural assets is expanding, the mass media (and this is where radio stands out) build new forms of socialisation and discourse production [10]. The reflections presented here, focusing on the UFMG Children's University programme, reveal the certainty that simply having technical resources available, such as those found on the radio, does not alone have the power to mobilise, nor to ensure dialogism between different discourses. It is wise to be aware of the many existing cultures, especially as regards childhood.

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Authors

Josemir Almeida Barros is a lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Education of the Minas Gerais State University, Brazil. E-mail: josemirbh@yahoo.com.br.

Débora d'Ávila Reis is a lecturer and researcher at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). She is the creator and coordinator of the Children's University project and coordinator of educational activities at the science museum, called the UFMG Knowledge Space. E-mail: debsdavila@gmail.com.

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