

## **Maria Benites**

### ***"Windows to the world"***

Windows to the World is a network that uses the Internet and web cams to “open windows” for groups of children, teenagers and adults who are interested in establishing relations with other cultures and strive for a better understanding of the world, the other and themselves.

The network Windows to the World started its activities in April 2002. This project was born out of the curiosity of researchers from the University of Siegen in Germany, the University Unicamp in Brazil and the municipal secretary for Education in Cuiabá in Brazil, who wanted to analyse the use of the Internet in different cultures. They wanted to explore how a tool from the most recent technology enables new forms of communication, cultural practices and linguistic changes for the individuals and their communities. The start idea was that, each time that a new technology is being discovered, the society producing it establishes new relations with the past and the future, with space and with oneself. This led to define the project's purpose as to investigate the relations established by children from three different cultures within a process of virtual communication through the latest technology.

As the project developed, more people showed interest in taking part, so that new groups of children and teenagers were spontaneously created and integrated to the network. This brought us to rethink the project in order to build up the possibilities of participation and to remove all space and time limits of the project. This evolution widened the original aim of the project over to the facilitation of communication between young people from different cultures, from different countries and seeing the world in different ways. We would like to stimulate the exchanges of experience, the major guideline being the interest of a group in another one, regardless of any of the classification criteria generally used to differentiate and separate human beings. We are now expanding the project over Brazil, Latin America and Europe. In Brazil and Latin America, the objective is to work with communities living on the fringe of the various processes of appropriating technology. In Europe, we want to address communities that are marginal to communication processes.

More concretely, the project Windows to the World works according to several framing principles :

- Groups of children (from 8 to 16 years old\*) located everywhere in the world meet once a week during one hour. This meeting takes place in the form of virtual transmission using the Internet, a web cam as well as the instant communication programmes MSN Messenger and Yahoo Messenger. These programmes are freeware and offer various possibilities of communication: chat, drawing, games etc.
- Each group has a facilitator and a coordinator. These can be staff members of the institution where the group is holding their meetings. Neither the coordinator nor the facilitator is to suggest, teach or evaluate anything. He or she merely stays at the disposal of the group in order to help them with technical issues. He or she also has to document the meetings.
- It is up to the members of the group to decide on the day and time of the meetings as well as the themes of discussion and the activities, the name and the lifetime of the group and the specific rules within the group.
- In the case of communication between different linguistic communi-

ties, simultaneous translation is available for the following languages: English, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish.

- If you are interested in participating, just fulfil the formulary on <http://www.janelasparaomundo.org> and send it to the general coordination of the project.

\* (Other age groups can be taken into consideration, but there must be at least two different groups in the same age bracket order for them to communicate – communication between different age groups is to avoid.)

The groups are chosen according to the following criteria:

- Groups of children, teenagers and young adults linked to any institution and which, for various reasons, have difficulties to access and appropriate new technologies and to communicate with other cultures.
- Cultural and geographical diversity: the groups are preferably located in different parts of the world.
- Commitment of the coordinator and/or facilitator of the group to fulfil the requirements and criteria for the participation.
- Parental authorisation (or authorisation of the person in charge) for their child to take part in the group.

Moreover, the project Windows to the World is matter of constant methodological preoccupation, especially regarding research methodology. The network Windows to the World is not a pedagogical project. Its only rule for the regulation of its activities is: Nothing is to be taught or evaluated, but everyone can learn if curiosity leads them to ask questions. The learning process is much more significant and important than the content of learning. All communicating activities between the groups are saved, classified and recorded in a database available for research. The observation of this social event must interfere as little as possible and make sure that this principle is creating opportunities for the emergence of specific relations. The documentation is yearly analysed by a network made of researchers from various universities, facilitators, members of the groups and special guests. Furthermore, the project is being investigated under different perspectives by a PhD student and a graduate student. This variety of research approaches give to Windows to the World a rich interdisciplinary base out of which both answers and new questions can emerge.