Dispatx & Palabras - Improvised Maps
by : Sharon Daniel

Palabras_
"A language is a dialect with an army and navy" - Max Weinreich

Language acts like a map - it encodes and decodes information - it traces the edges of borders and walls - it locates a subject in relation to a complex of nationalities and ethnicities, simultaneously representing and producing difference. Words name and label, order and classify, separate and differentiate. Words also connect.

Through categorization, objects and ideas, individuals and groups, races and classes are identified and determined - often over-determined. A category can both describe and prescribe a relation between the subject and objects-of-knowledge. Categorization and Classification systematize the construction of meaning, and demonstrate relations of power.

At one end of the spectrum of classification systems, Taxonomies impose a hierarchical structure or generalized interpretation on the objects they describe. At the other end, Folksonomies (folk + taxonomy) allow multiple interpretations and associations to emerge among objects and descriptors. As demonstrated by the Dispatx website, as well as online sites for sharing bookmarks (de.lirio.us) and images (Flickr), Folksonomies are generated by the creators of content when they label or describe the content they contribute to a database. These systems of content items are further developed when readers annotate any items they view.

Content creators and readers may use multiple descriptors to label a single piece of content, and/or one word to describe many different items. The labels are commonly known as tags and the process is called tagging.

As an example, a photographer may post an image of a family birthday party on a folksonomy-based photo-sharing site like Flickr and tag it with words like "family", "love" and "birthday". The photograph will immediately become associated with all other images contributed by Flickr users that are tagged with any or all of those three words. Say another contributor's photo is tagged with the words "family" and "home", but not with the word "love". The tag "love" and the tag "home", as well as all the associated content, will then become related because each is associated with content tagged with "family". Tags are highly correlated, or clustered, when they share relations to a number of different content items. Thus, folksonomic systems map an organically and spontaneously emerging network of semantic association.

Palabras_ http://Palabrastranquilas.ucsc.edu

is a web application that employs tagging to generate a spontaneous or improvised map of correspondences and connections between communities in various locations.

The project was based on the concept of the community computer, first proposed by activist Bruno Tardieu. The community computer is a social and technological system much like a typical computer in which words can make things happen and associative memory evolves over time. While the personal computer provides a communications gateway to the Internet where communities of interest can evolve regardless of distance, the concept of the community computer is intended not to bypass communities of place, but rather to strengthen, enable and empower them - particularly in marginalized communities.
Unlike other Folksonomic media sites (Flickr, and YouTube, for example) Palabras_ employs tagging in the context of place-based workshops designed to allow communities that may not normally have access to the internet to use media and information technologies to represent themselves and their own circumstances. Palabras also adopts the tactics of Do-It-Yourself technology to provide low cost and context appropriate media acquisition tools. Through Palabras_ workshops communities not traditionally thought of as scholarly or academic, produce knowledge and interpret their own experience.

**Background**

Palabras_ was initially developed during an intensive six-week residency at cheLA, the "Centro HiperMediatico Experimental Latinoamericano", in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The residency, supported by the University of California Digital Arts Research Network (UCDARnet), the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts (UCIRA), and cheLA, was initiated to stimulate research and experimentation in the area of public and community art utilizing new technologies and focused on building technology-based, community arts projects in Buenos Aires. The Palabras_ project development team in Buenos Aires included Sharon Daniel - principal artist and project director, Digital Arts/New Media MFA student; Michael Dale - research assistant, software developer and translator; two professors at the University of Buenos Aires who consulted and facilitated community contacts - Artist Carlos Trilnick and Anthropologist Carlos Masota and two University of Buenos Aires students - Cecilia Velasquez Trauf and Emilce Alvalos - who assisted in workshops.

Our goal was to develop media and information technology tools that would be useful to residents of economically and politically marginalized squatter communities or "villas" in Buenos Aires. Our project concept required the use of inexpensive image capture devices. Using R&D from the Do-It-Yourself technology community online we identified a 'disposable' digital video camera marketed in the United States that could be 'hacked' to be re-usable. We also took advantage of open source software available online for downloading and playing the video recovered from the cameras. Each Palabras_ workshop participant was loaned one of these inexpensive digital video cameras, each capable of recording up to 20 minutes of footage per use. We designed and built a custom web application (described below) for editing, sequencing and tagging the videos that participants produced.

After approximately three weeks of intensive development of hardware, software and of relationships with cultural centers in target communities, we initiated a series of workshops at two sites - del Centro cultural "El Envion" at villa Tranquila in the Municipalidad Avellaneda and Fundacion Crear Vale la Pena in Boulogne, Provencia de Buenos Aires. The work we began at both sites is now continuing with the support of the staff at each of the cultural centers. Palabras_ is also being used at a number of new sites.

The Palabras_ website currently provides access to an archive of over 2000 video clips created in Buenos Aires (Argentina), Kiel (Germany), San Francisco & San Jose (California, USA) and Darfur (Sudan) - through the folksonomies thus generated, participant communities have evolved. The Palabras_ workshop tools and database browser adopt the folksonomic method to give participants the opportunity to interpret and classify their own content. This method also simultaneously generates a map of semantic associations between the self-representations created by participant-communities across languages and cultures.

At each site Palabras_ workshop participants document their daily lives with the inexpensive, disposable digital video cameras that have been hacked. They subsequently tag, organize and share their videos online using the Palabras_ editor. This custom-built web-application was designed to facilitate the discovery of relationships and connections between participants'
personal stories by allowing them to label their video content with a shared vocabulary that is both originated by and familiar to them. The web-application also provides simple search, editing and sequencing tools that participants may use to create video sequences using their own clips, as well as those created by members of their community. Participants can search for relevant clips from their site by individual tag or by browsing their site's tag cloud. The tag cloud visualizes all of the tags that belong to a site using a distribution algorithm, which scales the size of a tag related to the number of times it has been used. For example, a participant at Crear Vale la Pena in Buenos Aires might scan the site's tag cloud and decide to make a sequence of clips tagged with "cuerpo", or "body" - which is prominent in the tag cloud, indicating that there are many clips associated with that keyword. After selected a tag, a participant may then choose from the clips that are subsequently displayed. The clip editor lists related tags for each clip and the participant may use these to look for clips in order to construct a sequence based on this network of semantic associations. Visitors to this site may also add tags to clips and sequences in the archive.

Palabras _workshops in local cultural centers at each Palabras _site have focused on strategies for collective self-representation. Most recently, Palabras _was used by participants in a ten-day workshop/residency in Kiel, Germany. Dancers and Musicians from Foundation Crear Vale la Pena (creativity is worthwhile) in Buenos Aires traveled to Kiel to collaborate with young people from the Mettenhof neighborhood on the development of a media and dance-theater presentation exploring the concept of "respect". Participants used Palabras _video cameras, tagging and editing tools in a series of investigations of the concept, which were incorporated into the media/dance-theater presentation developed over the course of the residency. The results of these investigations are accessible through the Palabras _browser under the site named "respect".

The Argentinian dancers and musicians from Crear Vale la Pena and the young people from Kiel did not speak the same language. For several of the young people from Kiel, German was a second and relatively new language. Therefore, discussions on the meaning of respect were conducted in several languages simultaneously (Spanish, German, English, Romany, Kurdish and Russian), first in translation and then through the development of extra-linguistic means of communication in exercises designed to develop trust and mutual respect among the participants. These exercises engaged the participant pairs in a joint effort to articulate and represent their own experiences of social exclusion and inclusion through movement, music making, video making, discussion, and analysis.

For example, the first video making exercise began with a translated discussion on the meaning of respect and social inclusion. Everyone present participated in developing a series of ten questions on the nature of respect, which were written down in Spanish and German. The participants were then organized into pairs - one Spanish speaker and one German speaker - and given one of the hacked video cameras. The partners used the camera to record each others answers to the questions and then to record each partner attempting to interpret the others answers. Since the partners did not speak the same language they had to develop extra-linguistic means of both communicating and interpreting meaning in order to complete the task. Over the first five days of the residency the same pairs were given several other tasks in video making, movement and music making, which involved extra-linguistic communication. There were also many other translated discussions and rehearsals. When all of the video exercises were complete the pairs worked together to tag and sequence their clips using the Palabras _editor. The clips were incorporated into the public media/dance-theater presentation primarily as segments displayed in a projection of the Palabras _browser between each dance or musical segment. During the performance each workshop participant triggered a clip to play by selecting a tag and told the story and meaning of the clip to the audience while the clip played. In the dress rehearsal there was a moment of confusion. One
of the narrators, Vanessa, whose first language is Romany and second language is German, could not remember the tag she had used for the clip she was to narrate and was searching for her password instead of the tag. Confusion increased as the problem was translated in English, Spanish and German - to no avail. Finally, Cachito, Vanessa’s video making/tagging partner, who’s only language is Spanish, was called upon to help. Vanessa and Cachito sorted things out in a few seconds, communicating by means of idiosyncratic gestures, facial expressions and un-translated Romany and Spanish keywords.

Through the tagging, editing and video exercises, Vanessa and Cachito, and all of the Spanish/German speaking pairs, improvised a method of communication that used translation, not merely in its linguistic sense, but in the sense of "a motion across, a traversal". Their method of translation reflects its mathematical definition: "a transformation in which the origin of a coordinate system (in this case, the complex coordinate system of nationality - language, cultural identity, political citizenship, class, and race), is moved to a new position or across a boundary, while the direction of each axis (in this case, each individual’s subjective identity), is maintained (respected, recognized, accepted, and acknowledged)." This is mode of translation mapped in Palabras_.

The hacked disposable cameras provide the means by which participants can document and represent their own experience. The browser interface allows a global and international online audience to examine the ways in which place-based communities and individuals describe their own social contexts. Visitors online can contribute to the evolving folksonomy that organizes these representations in clusters of semantic association. What is shared among and between participant communities, and interpreted by both visitors and participants alike, is visualized in the tag cloud as an improvised map of correspondences across cultures. The folksonomy generated here constitutes an emerging communication - a common language that is associative and cross-contextual - a hybrid that merges word and image into a kind of mediatised Esperanto. This 'folksonomic Esperanto' is the result of the use of media and information technologies and it is the use of technology.

The Palabras_ tools and interfaces translate - shifting the social location of knowledge to help produce the critical consciousness necessary to challenge existing relations of power. The project’s fundamental premise is that the images through which we view the perspectives and experiences of others should be originated in context. They should be interpreted, organized and disseminated by those who are themselves represented. In this way communication, exchange, awareness and understanding can be generated from the bottom up, not the top down.

**Palabras_dispatx**

Dispax Improvised Maps will constitute a new Palabras_ "site". Readers that visit Palabras_ through the Improvised Maps edition of Dispax can record and tag clips for this site by connecting a USB camera to their computer and navigating to the Palabras_dispatx record interface.

Please add your image and voice to Palabras_dispatx.

**Instructions**

To record your own commentary on the concept of Improvised Maps you will need to attach a USB or Firewire camera to your computer. When you open the Palabras_record interface a small pop-up window will appear requesting access to your camera and microphone. Click "allow" then click the red button and arrow at the top left corner of the video clip window to connect your camera to Palabras_. When you see your image in the record window press the red 'record' button. You can record up to 30 seconds of video and
audio. Press stop if you are finished before your time is up. You can review your clip with the playback button. If you are not satisfied with your clip you may record over again before submitting it. You may submit as many clips as you like.

When you have finished recording each clip please add your name, where you are from and any tags you would like to add separated by commas - for example: 'sarah, finland, politics, democracy, individualism, improvisation'. You can then submit your clip to Palabras_dispatx by pressing the '+' button. You can search for clips submitted by others by selecting tags from the tag list below the clip window.

The editors of Dispatx and the Palabras_ project team ask that participants record, tag and contribute their own video commentary on the concept of Improvised Maps - which may take the form of an associated project based on the theme and/or the documentation of an original improvised map in which the contributor may "identifying themselves in a specific context".

About Dispatx
by: Dispatx Art Collective
Dispatx is a curatorial platform that provides the tools of a socialised internet for the development and presentation of contemporary art and literature. It was created in 2004 by Oliver Luker, Vanessa Oniboni and David Stent.

The website functions both as a rigorous concept-space for the exploration of the creative method - the organisational process which translates creative vision into creative product - and as an exhibition space for concluded works.

Visitors are invited to interact with the working processes of contributing artists presented online and to create unique private collections of finished works in My Dispatx.

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